

The Poetic Edda

**Larrington, Carolyne, Acker,
Paul**

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The Poetic Edda

ESSAYS ON
OLD NORSE
MYTHOLOGY

Edited by
PAUL ACKER AND
CAROLYNE LARRINGTON



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Preface

Four of the essays in this collection, those by Carolyn Larrington, Margaret Clunies Ross, Paul Acker, and Judy Quinn, were written expressly for this volume. Two others, those by Lars Lönnroth and Svava Jakobsdóttir, were translated (from Swedish and Icelandic respectively) for inclusion in this volume. Their original places of publication and those of the other contributions are cited here; all are reprinted with permission.

Lönnroth, Lars. "Midgårds grundläggning (Völuspá 1–8)." *Den dubbla scenen: Muntlig diktning från Eddan till ABBA*. Stockholm: Prisma, 1978. 29–52; notes 401.

Svava Jakobsdóttir. "Gunnlöð og hinn dýri mjöður." *Skírnir* 162 (1988): 215–45.

Harris, Joseph. "Cursing with the Thistle: 'Skírnismál' 31, 6–8, and OE Metrical Charm 9, 16–17." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975): 26–33.

Clover, Carol J. "Hárbarðsljóð as Generic Farce." *Scandinavian Studies* 51 (1979): 124–45.

Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben. "Thor's Fishing Expedition." *Words and Objects: Towards a Dialogue Between Archaeology and History of Religion*. The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, Oslo. Ser. B: Skrifter. 71. Ed. Gro Steinsland. Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986. 257–78.

Anderson, Philip N. "Form and Content in the *Lokasenna*: A Re-evaluation." *Edda* (1981): 215–225. By permission of Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, Norway.

Frakes, Jerold C. "Loki's Mythological Function in the Tripartite System." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 86 (1987): 473–86.

McKinnell, John. "The Context of *Völundarkviða*." *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 23.1 (1990): 1–27.

Hill, Thomas D. "Rígsþula: Some Medieval Christian Analogues." *Speculum* 61 (1986): 79–89.

For the photograph of the Altuna Stone, Gotland ([Fig. 1](#)) and Ardre Stone VIII, Gotland ([Fig. 3](#)), we acknowledge Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet, Stockholm, Sweden. The photograph of the Gosforth Stone, Cumbria,

England (Fig. 2) was taken by T. Middlemass and is copyrighted by the Department of Archaeology, University of Durham. The photograph of the Hørdum Stone (Fig. 4) is copyrighted by the National Museum of Denmark, Danish Collections. All are reprinted with permission.

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Introduction

Edda 2000

Around the turn of the last millennium, the Anglo-Saxon monk Ælfric wrote a homily on the ‘false gods’ (*De falsis diis*) of the heathens.¹ In part following an earlier Latin source, Ælfric gives a Christian, euhemeristic view of the origins of Roman paganism; he treats the Roman gods as having originally been men who were then deified in error. In ancient times, Ælfric tells us, men worshiped the sun and moon as gods. Next they venerated certain evil and powerful rulers, namely Saturn, his son Jove, Mars, Mercury and Venus. To his source, Ælfric adds a few comments regarding the Danish heathens of his own time, many of whom had settled in northern England. They used the name Þór for Jove, Óðon for Mercury, and Frigg for Venus; they honored Þór above all their gods and considered him to be the son of Óðon (Pope, 683–6). The pagan Romans established a day for each of these ‘gods’. Ælfric gives the Old English names for Sunday and Monday and says that the third day was named, in Latin, for Mars. The fourth was named for Mercury, the fifth for Jove, the sixth for Venus and the seventh for Saturn. He does not specify (but surely knew) that the Old English names for these days of the week, like the Danish names, commemorated Germanic heathen gods, the equivalents (in some sense) of the Roman ones: Tiw (Old Norse Týr) on Tuesday, Woden (Óðinn) on Wednesday, Thunor (Þórr) on Thursday and Frige (Frigg) on Friday.² Ælfric probably also knew that some Anglo-Saxon noblemen, including his own patrons, claimed to be descended from Woden (see Johnson, 59–62); what more he might have known about the Danish or Anglo-Saxon pagan gods is open to debate.³ But Ælfric’s reticence in this matter is typical of Old English sources as a whole, which tell us precious little about the gods venerated by the English before their conversion to Christianity beginning in the sixth century.⁴ Information about Tiw, Woden, Thunor and Frige is hard to come by; fortunately, more can be learned about their Old Norse counterparts.

The Scandinavians were only just converting to Christianity in Ælfric’s time, the Danes starting in the 960s, the Icelanders just in time for the millennium.⁵ Perhaps because they converted so late and were comparatively remote from and resistant to ecclesiastical and royal authorities,⁶ the Icelanders recorded more of their pagan mythological and heroic material than

any other Germanic people.⁷ Some of that material survives from before the conversion in skaldic poetry: formally complex verse, often in praise of Norwegian kings, that alluded to Norse gods in its imagery.⁸ Snorri in his *Edda* was in fact recording mythic narratives in order to explain the earlier skaldic allusions⁹—luckily, for us, because it is in his *Edda* and the related *Poetic Edda* that the bulk of Old Norse myths and legends are now preserved.¹⁰

Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241), voted the Icelandic ‘scholar of the millennium’ in a recent poll,¹¹ was one of the most powerful chieftains in the last decades of the Icelandic Commonwealth, often called the Sturlung Age for the prominence of Snorri’s family in that era.¹² Snorri’s scholarly output included a number of biographical sagas about the Norwegian kings (most of them collected in *Heimskringla*) and the *Edda*, known variously as *Snorra Edda* (Snorri’s *Edda*), the *Prose Edda*, or the *Younger Edda* (the latter two names to distinguish it from the *Poetic* or *Elder Edda*, discussed below). The name itself is not definitively understood. In Icelandic “Edda” can mean ‘great-grandmother’ (as in the poem *Rígsþula*, st. 2); or it may have been a new coinage based on Latin “edo,” ‘I compose’, hence ‘poetics’ (which it came to mean in any case); or perhaps it was a playful combination of the two, as in effect the ‘great-grandmother of all poetic handbooks’.¹³ The work begins with a Christian prologue that euhemerizes the Norse gods in something of the same way Ælfric had done for the pagan Roman gods. After Noah’s flood (so this account runs), people forgot the name of God, although they reasoned through their ‘earthly understanding’ that a being controlled the heavens. In Troy, which we (that is, Snorri and his contemporaries) now call Tyrkland (Turkey), there lived a grandson of Priam named Tror, whom we now call Þórr. He came to rule in Thrace, which we now call Þrúðheimr (Þórr’s residence). He married a prophetess named Sibyl, whom we call Sif (Sif is Þórr’s wife); one of their descendants was Voden, whom we call Óðinn. He set out for the Northern lands and established his sons as founders of dynasties in Denmark, Norway and Sweden; because they were from Asia they were called Æsir.

The background of this prologue in learned Latin culture with its (false) etymologies, Trojan origins and neo-Platonic explanations of heathen religion, is apparent enough.¹⁴ Just as Aeneas left Troy to found Italy (in Virgil’s *Aeneid*) and Brutus to found Britain (in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*), so Þórr, via his descendant Óðinn, founded Scandinavia. Having once made this accommodation of the erroneous ideas of his non-Christian forefathers, however, Snorri then proceeds to narrate authentic Old Norse myths without further apology.¹⁵ As he does so he often stops to cite stanzas from his sources, skaldic poems but also anonymous poems such as *Völuspá* and *Grímnismál*.¹⁶ Most of the poems of this type from which Snorri quotes are also found in complete versions in a single manuscript written down in about 1270, the Codex Regius (‘King’s Book’).¹⁷ When this

manuscript of poetry came to the attention of the Icelandic bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson in 1643, he and his contemporaries thought the author was Sæmundr Sigfússon ‘the learned’ (1056–1133) and that Snorri had derived his *Edda* from it; hence the collection was called *Sæmundar Edda* (see Jonas Kristjánsson, 25). That attribution of authorship no longer stands, but the poems in the manuscript are still referred to as the (*Poetic* or *Elder*) *Edda*. In addition, a few poems of the same type from other manuscripts are usually added to the canon of Eddic poetry, as defined by modern editors such as Sophus Bugge¹⁸, Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn.

The first eleven poems in the Codex Regius treat mythological themes,¹⁹ and they are the focus of the present collection of essays. To them are added three mythological Eddic poems not found in the Codex Regius (*Baldrs draumar*, *Rígsþula* and *Hyndluljóð*).²⁰ Taken together, the poems convey an outline of Old Norse mythic history, from the creation of the earth, heavens, giants, gods and humans; through the war of the Æsir and Vanir (two classes of gods) and the accidental killing of Óðinn’s son Baldr; and ahead to the ultimate battle against evil beings at Ragnaøk (the ‘doom of the gods’).²¹ Individually the poems present mythic episodes: Óðinn consults with vǫlur or sibyls (*Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*), then speaks several stanzas of proverbial wisdom and recounts a few of his own adventures (*Hávamál*). In *Vafþrúðnismál*, he engages in a deadly wisdom contest with a giant; in *Grímnismál* he outlines mythological geography while seated shamanlike between two fires. Freyr pines for the giantess Gerðr and sends his servant Skírnir to woo her with presents, threats and curses (*Skírnismál*). Þórr exchanges insults with a disguised Óðinn (*Hárbarðsljóð*); then goes in quest with Týr for a brewing cauldron owned by the giant Hymir, with whom he goes fishing and snags the World-Serpent (*Hymiskviða*). Loki insults all the gods in turn at a feast (*Lokasenna*), then acts as Þórr’s bridesmaid to prevent a giant from marrying Freyja (*Þrymskviða*). An elf-like smith weds a swan-maiden, loses her, is imprisoned and then exacts revenge (*Vǫlundarkviða*). Þórr questions a know-it-all dwarf to prevent him from running off with his daughter (*Alvíssmál*). Heimdallr travels among humankind and fathers the progenitors of the three social classes (*Rígsþula*). Freyja consults a giant sibyl to learn the ancestors of her human protégé, Óttar (*Hyndluljóð*).

Some of these poems have prose introductions or narrative frames, but the dominant mode is monologue²² and dialogue, with stanzas spoken by the gods, both Æsir (chiefly Óðinn, Þórr and Loki) and Vanir (chiefly Freyr and Freyja)²³; vǫlur and giants (*Vafþrúðnir*, Hymir and his unnamed wife, Þrymr, Gerðr, and Hyndla); an elf (*Vǫlundr*); a dwarf (*Alvíss*) and a few humans (*Skírnir*?; King Níðuðr and his family in *Vǫlundarkviða*).²⁴

Most of the mythological poems of the *Edda* are represented in this volume by a single essay, except *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* which are discussed together, as are *Vǫluspá*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð* (with *Vǫluspá* also being treated first in a separate essay). We have added a second essay (by

Frakes) relating to *Lokasenna* but focusing more on the figure of Loki, bringing the total appropriately enough up to thirteen.²⁵ Four of the essays (those by Larrington, Clunies Ross, Acker and Quinn) were written expressly for this volume. Two others, those by Lönnroth and Svava Jakobsdóttir were translated (from Swedish and Icelandic respectively) for this volume. The other articles are reprinted from the journals cited in the acknowledgments. Harris has added an afterword to his article, and the authors and/or editors have added some translations of foreign phrases, amplified some bibliographic citations, corrected a few misprints, and made minor revisions.

The essays reflect a range of critical and theoretical approaches. All of the essays benefit from (and, in varying degrees, contribute to) the long history of philological studies; all employ close readings, whether of episodes, poems or groups of poems. Lönnroth applies ideological criticism and reception theory to reveal the social and political messages underlying *Völuspá* as they might have been received by a thirteenth-century Icelandic audience. In her 1987 Icelandic novel *Gunnlaðar saga*, Svava Jakobsdóttir received *Hávamál* for a modern Scandinavian audience, interweaving a story set in contemporary Denmark with the medieval poem's episode involving *Gunnlgð* and Óðinn. Her essay elaborates on her interpretation of that episode, employing feminist and comparative mythological approaches. Larrington's reading is ideological and anthropological. She argues that *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* delineate the proper relationship between men and gods in the Old Norse mythic universe. Harris, as in much of his other work, emphasizes the function of genre (a Germanic tradition of cursing in *Skírnismál*) as revealed via a comparative approach with Old English literature and later folklore. Clover, too, focuses on a Germanic genre, the *senna* or flyting on which she has written elsewhere and which she sees as parodied in *Hárbarðslið*. Meulengracht Sørensen compares Viking Age sources for the myth of Þórr's fishing for the World-Serpent—picture stones and skaldic poems—with medieval sources for the same myth in the Eddic poem *Hymiskviða* and in Snorri's *Edda*.

Philip N. Anderson's essay employs formalist, stylistic and dramatic criticism. He elucidates the interplay between speakers and stanzas, repetitions and metrical effects in *Lokasenna*. Jerold Frakes responds to the structuralist mythological approach of Georges Dumézil, who had claimed a tripartite set of functions for Norse and other Indo-European gods but had difficulty placing Loki in his schema. On the basis of *Lokasenna* and other sources, Frakes argues that Loki plays an anti-functional role. Margaret Clunies Ross's essay, like her two-volume study of Old Norse mythology, is informed by anthropology, feminism and cultural studies. She reads *Drymskviða* against other myths concerning relations between gods and giants and in light of societal norms for gender roles in medieval Iceland. In the first part of his article on *Völundarkviða*, John McKinnell supplies lexical and metrical evidence to suggest that the poem was composed not in Iceland or

Norway but in a Norse-speaking area of Yorkshire, England. Arguing in the second half of his essay that approaches to the Welund legend can rely too heavily on a constructed archetype, he employs literary historical methods to determine the *Vǫlundarkviða* poet's particular aims in adapting the legend. Paul Acker challenges structuralist approaches to mythology, or more particularly to lore about one class of mythological beings: dwarves. Against Motz's isolation of an archetypal dwarf that would find *Alviðr* aberrant in the poem named for him (*Alviðsmál*), Acker suggests that mythological lore varies according to different narrative and generic demands. Throughout his scholarly career, Thomas D. Hill has explored the interaction of medieval literature and medieval Biblical commentary, whether scholarly (patristic) or more in the nature of 'popular Christian mythology'. For *Rígsþula*'s myth of the creation of three social classes, Hill finds analogues in medieval (chiefly insular) glosses on the three sons of Noah. Finally, Judy Quinn examines a sub-genre of poems involving a *vǫlva* or prophetess in order to determine that figure's function in the overall Old Norse mythological scheme. As in her other work, this essay is informed by feminist, speech-act and oral theories, and pays particular attention to variations in the manuscript record.

Each essay is preceded by a brief introduction that summarizes the poem and gives an overview of recent criticism. The articles themselves provide detailed bibliographical references to scholarship in various languages. For the convenience of beginning students, however, we append below a general bibliography that focuses on English-language monographs.

Paul Acker

Notes

1. Ed. John C. Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, EETS o.s. 259–260 (London: Oxford University Press, 1967–8), 2:667–724; see esp. 680–87. Partial translations in Albert S. Cook and Chauncey B. Tinker, *Select Translations from Old English Prose* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 186–191; and in David F. Johnson, "Euhemerisation versus Demonisation: The Pagan Gods and Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*," in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, Germanica Latina 2, ed. T. Hofstra, et al. (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), 35–69. Pope (1: 147) dates *De falsis diis* between 992 and 998. Wulfstan adapted Ælfric's homily, concentrating on the portion discussed here; ed. Dorothy Bethurum, *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 221–24, notes 333–39. Some time around 1200, Ælfric's homily was translated into Old Icelandic; see Arnold Taylor, "*Hauksbók* and Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*," *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 3 (1969): 101–09.

2. Johnson (55–7) points out that Byrhtferth of Ramsey in his *Enchiridion* does explicitly correlate the Roman gods and the English names for

weekdays, as does a marginal commentator of Wulfstan's homily.

3. See A. L. Meaney, "Æthelweard, Ælfric, the Norse Gods and Northumbria," *Journal of Religious History* 6 (1970): 105–32.

4. For a conservative appraisal of the evidence for Anglo-Saxon paganism, focusing on the archaeological record (especially grave finds), see David Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London: Routledge, 1992). For a more speculative approach focusing on written evidence, see Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

5. See Peter Foote, "Conversion" in Pulsiano, *et al.*, 106–08, with bibliography. The dates given are for what Foote calls major "moments" in the conversion, when Christianity becomes officially adopted; missionary work and individual conversions will of course have begun earlier. The "moment" for conversion in Norway began ca. 995 under King Óláfr Tryggvason (who sent his emissaries to Iceland) and continued under King (later Saint) Óláfr Haraldsson (d. 1030). Sweden lagged behind; its heathen temple at Uppsala was not destroyed until the twelfth century, according to Martin (42), who also argues against there being any millennial motivations behind the Scandinavian conversion (45–8).

6. Iceland was first settled in about 870; its early history is usually divided into an age of settlement from 870 to 930, when an Alþingi or parliament was established; and a commonwealth or free state period until 1262–4, when Iceland submitted to Norwegian rule. See Jón Jóhanesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Islendinga saga*, tr. Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974) and Richard Tomasson, *Iceland: The First New Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

7. The only comparable source is the *Gesta Danorum* (History of the Danes), written in Latin by Saxo Grammaticus around 1216. Relying in part on Icelandic informants, Saxo imbeds euhemerized Norse mythological material in a legendary history of the Danish kings. See Eric Christiansen, "Saxo Grammaticus" in Pulsiano, *et al.*, 566–9, with bibliography.

8. See Roberta Frank, "Skaldic Poetry," in Clover & Lindow, 157–9; Bjarne Fidjestøl, "Skaldic Verse," in Pulsiano *et al.*, 592–4.

9. This applies mainly to *Skáldskaparmál*, the second of the three parts of Snorri's *Edda*.

10. Other sources besides those already mentioned (none of them without accompanying problems of interpretation) include place name and other linguistic evidence (including a few runic inscriptions), classical accounts (e.g. Tacitus, regarding Germania), travel accounts (notably that of Ibn Fadlan among the Norsemen in Russia), conversion accounts (e.g. Adam of Bremen, concerning Uppsala), picture stones and other representations (see Meulengracht Sørensen in this volume), other Icelandic prose sources including the kings' sagas, family sagas and legendary sagas, and later

folklore. See Turville-Petre, ch. 1; Martin, chs. 2 and 4; Davidson, chs. 1–2.

11. As reported on the website “Daily News from Iceland,” Dec. 1, 1999; www.icenews.is. I thank my student Eve Siebert for conveying this information.

12. We learn much about Snorri’s life in the collection of contemporary accounts known as the *Sturlunga saga*, part of which was written by his nephew Sturla Þórðarson (ed. Kristján Eldjárn, *et al.* [Reykjavik: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946]; tr. Julia McGrew and R. George Thomas [New York: Twayne, 1970–74]); see also Marlene Ciklamini, *Snorri Sturluson* (Boston: Twayne, 1978) and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *The Age of the Sturlungs: Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century*, *Islandica* 36, tr. Johann S. Hannesson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953).

13. See Anthony Faulkes, “Edda,” *Gripla* 2 (1977): 32–9.

14. On this background, see Anthony Faulkes, “Pagan Sympathy: Attitudes to Heathendom in the Prologue to *Snorra Edda*,” *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert J. Glendinning & Haraldur Bessason, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983, 283–314; and “Descent from the gods,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978–9), 92–125.

15. Snorri returns briefly to his euhemeristic frame at the end of *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes *Edda* ed. 54–5; tr. 57–8) and early on in *Skáldskaparmál* (tr. 64–5). See Margaret Clunies Ross, “The Mythological Fictions of *Snorra Edda*,” *Snorrastefna*, ed. Ulfar Bragason (Reykjavik: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992), 204–16, which also comments on Snorri’s narrative technique.

16. According to Faulkes (*Edda* ed. 1:xxvi), Snorri most often cites these two poems and *Vafþrúðnismál* among Eddic poems; the last he does not name but says e.g. “And here it is told by the giant Vafþrúdnir” (Faulkes, *Edda* tr. 10).

17. In 1662 Bishop Brynjólfur gave this manuscript to the king of Denmark; it was housed in the Danish Old Royal Collection (gammel kongelige Sammlung, abbreviated GkS), under the siglum GkS 2365 4to. In 1971 the Codex Regius was returned to Iceland and it is now housed in the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, Reykjavik. For the transcription date of 1270, see Harris, 75.

18. *Norræn fornkvæði* (Christiania [Oslo]: Mailing, 1867).

19. The remaining poems treat legendary and heroic themes, especially concerning Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, the Dragonslayer (the Siegfried of Wagnerian opera). As Turville-Petre points out (11–12), some of the heroic poems include mythological matter, e.g. references to Óðinn. *Völundarkviða* is sometimes felt to belong neither with the mythological nor the heroic poems and in some editions is moved to a place after *Alvíssmál* (see Hallberg, 30; Paul Beekman Taylor, “*Völundarkviða*,” in Pulsiano *et al.*, 711–13.). Dronke includes *Völundarkviða* among the mythological poems.

20. A fourth such poem, *Grottasöngur*, found in manuscripts of *Snorra*

Edda, is not included. We consider that its association with the legendary Danish king Fróði places it among the heroic poems.

21. This mythic history is imparted principally in *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð* (see Quinn's article in this volume), but is alluded to in other poems. *Grímnismál* fills in more details of mythic geography (see Larrington's article in this volume).

22. *Völuspá* is a monologue spoken by a *völva* or prophetess. *Hávamál* is spoken by Hávi, presumably Óðinn; some stanzas are addressed to one Loddfáfnir. *Grímnismál* is also spoken by Óðinn, to Agnarr and Geirrøðr, with a prose introduction setting the scene more clearly.

23. Óðinn's wife Frigg speaks a few stanzas at the beginning of *Vafþrúðnismál*; Týr speaks a few lines in *Hymiskviða*; most of the assembled gods speak stanzas in response to Loki's insults in *Lokasenna*. *Rígsþula* contains no dialogue until the end, when a crow speaks to the young king, at which point the poem ends incompletely.

24. On the relation of *völur* and giants, see Quinn in this volume. *Völundr* is said to be a 'prince of elves' but also 'the most skillful of men'; Dronke (262) regards him as a 'mixed being'. As Clunies Ross points out (131), Skírnir in st. 18 of *Skírnismál* states that he is 'neither elf nor Áss nor wise Vane'; he is Freyr's "skósveinn" or servant. A herdsman and a serving-maid also speak stanzas (12 and 15) in *Skírnismál*; servants also speak in *Lokasenna*.

25. On Loki as the thirteenth god, see Orchard, 2 (s.v. *Æsir*) and ed. Faulkes 2: 153 n. 1/9–11.

“The Founding of Miðgarðr (*Völuspá* 1–8)”

Lars Lönnroth

Translated by Faul Acker

Völuspá

Völuspá is the first poem in the Codex Regius; it also takes pride of place in the poetic record of Old Norse mythology, especially as a source for myths of creation and of the destruction of the world at Ragnarøk. In his *Edda*, Snorri drew extensively on the poem, quoting some thirty stanzas and paraphrasing material from sixteen others (Nordal, 1; see also Mundal). In addition to the stanzas quoted in manuscripts of Snorri and the complete version in the Codex Regius, the poem is preserved in a variant version in *Hauksbók* (AM 544 4to; see Quinn 1990). Composed mainly in the meter *fornyrðislag*, *Völuspá* is usually dated to ca. 1000 (see further below).

The poem takes the form of a monologue spoken by a *völva*, or prophetess. She addresses the father of the slain (Óðinn), who has asked her to ‘declare the ancient histories of men and gods’. She is an ancient being, perhaps even dead (she ‘sinks down’ at the end of the poem), and recalls a time when she was fostered by giants, before the earth, sea and sky were formed. These elements were established by the sons of Burr (Óðinn and his brothers, the male elders of the Æsir) and made orderly by the Æsir on their *rökstólar*, or thrones of judgment. They build temples, forge tools and live in an age of gold, cheerfully playing checkers, ‘until three giantesses came’. Next the prophetess tells of the creation of dwarves (a long list of dwarf-names intervenes) and of the first two human beings, Ask and Embla; she also mentions Yggdrasill (the World-Tree) and the well of three maidens whose names mean (roughly) Past, Present and Future; they cast lots to determine human destinies.

Sts. 21–4 tell of a war between the Æsir and the Vanir. The Æsir try to burn Gullveigr (Gold Drink), who is thrice reborn and becomes Heiðr (Heath), who teaches *seiðr*, or witchcraft, among human women (Gullveigr and Heiðr probably represent aspects of Freyja). Óðinn throws his deadly spear but his stronghold is shattered and the Vanir survive, perhaps signifying that “the unflinching killing power of Óðinn was united with the unflinching regenerative

power of Freyja” (Dronke ed., 44). Another crisis ensues (sts. 25–6): a giant is about to wed Freyja but Þórr kills him. (Snorri tells a more elaborate version [*Gylf.*, ch. 42]; Freyja was promised to the giant if he could rebuild Ásgarðr in what seemed an impossibly short time.) Do you want to know more, or what? The prophetess asks for the first of nine times. She alludes to Óðinn’s pledging his eye for a drink of mead from Mímir’s well, then tells of another crisis: Óðinn’s son Baldr is killed when Hqðr throws a sprig of mistletoe at him. (Again Snorri provides more details [*Gylf.*, ch. 49]: Óðinn’s wife Frigg had received vows from all things, with the exception of mistletoe, not to harm Baldr. Loki then gave a piece of mistletoe to Hqðr, who was blind, to throw at Baldr when the gods were amusing themselves by hurling missiles at him.)

The remainder of the poem leads up to and beyond the climactic battle at Ragnarøk (the fate or doom of the gods, st. 43). The prophetess sees the punishment of Loki and of men in the realm of the dead. Monstrous wolves are born and the sun grows dim in a rain of blood. Roosters crow to waken the warriors of Óðinn and of Hel. The monstrous dog Garmr howls outside his cave, about to break free of his chains. Brothers kill each other, siblings commit incest and the human world is full of whoredom and violence. Heimdallr blows his horn and the world-tree trembles where it stands. The giant (Loki, in his final incarnation) slips free; so do the World-Serpent and the Ship of the Dead. Surtr advances with his sword of fire, mountains collide and the heavens split. Óðinn goes to fight the wolf Fenrir, Freyr faces Surtr and both gods are killed, to Frigg’s sorrow. Þórr strikes furiously at the World-Serpent, then steps back nine paces and dies. The sun grows black, the land sinks into the sea, the stars fall from the sky, and the world ends in towering flames.

But the prophetess sees even further than that. She sees the earth rise up a second time. The surviving Æsir meet again on Iðavöll (Eddying Plain?, st. 57; cf. st. 7) and find one of their golden checkers in the grass. Hqðr and Baldr, slayer and slain, live again, first in the hall where Óðinn once reigned victorious, then in the new hall of Gimlé (Shelter from the Flames). Meanwhile, in the Dark Mountains, a dragon comes flying, carrying corpses in its wings.

Scholarly studies on mythology and *Völuspá* through about 1985 are annotated in Lindow; recent studies through 1983 are surveyed in Harris. Criticism of *Völuspá* in English in the twentieth century has been briefly surveyed by Quinn (1994), focusing on (for recent works) the scholarly debate on orality and the nature of manuscript texts, a subject also explored in her published conference paper (1990). Quinn mentions the comparison of *Völuspá* with Greek and Latin oracular texts made by Dronke (1992); this, as well as Dronke’s earlier studies on the poem are now reprinted in Dronke (1996) and integrated into her translation and commentary on the poem (1997; see also the commentary by Schach). Martin compares and contrasts creation

myths in *Völuspá*, other Eddic poems and *Snorra Edda*. Jochens (1989) explores the images of women in the poem; since they are not very positive on the whole, she thinks it unlikely that the author of *Völuspá* was a woman, as some other scholars have suggested. Motz argues that both Gullveig and Heiðr represent the first brewing of mead.

Lönnroth (1981) provides a critical background for his chapter on *Völuspá* translated below. After the student revolutions of 1968, Scandinavian scholars became more interested in ideologically oriented criticism and reception theory, which focuses on how an audience, medieval or modern, receives a text rather than on how an author creates it. Lönnroth thus conceives of a prophetic persona delivering the poem to an Icelandic audience at the time the poem was written down (the thirteenth century), through which the dominant ideology of the powerful chieftains and their clerical allies validates itself through myth. Lönnroth was also responding to the influential interpretations of Sigurður Nordal, who had imagined an Icelandic poet wrestling with pagan and Christian influences at the dawn of the millennium, when Nordal supposed the poem to have been composed. While Lönnroth usually writes for a scholarly audience, his interpretation printed here was originally published as a chapter in a book directed at a Swedish popular audience, the subtitle of which translates as ‘oral poetry from Edda to ABBA’ (the Swedish musical group of the 1970s). It is here translated into English for the first time.

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The Founding of Miðgarðr (*Völuspá* 1–8)

I
Völuspá, or ‘The Sibyl’s Prophecy’, is the most noteworthy and the most often discussed of the Eddic mythological poems.¹ It was probably composed during heathen times but no one can say precisely when, where or by whom. The text must have changed considerably during oral transmission before being written down finally in thirteenth-century Iceland in three versions that differ from each other at several points; they would all seem to be highly corrupt descendants of an original version. The Icelandic text which is given on the preceding pages, and which provides the basis for my translation, is to be seen as a reconstruction.² It may be supposed that the reconstruction gives a fairly good picture of the poem as it generally was performed on the farms of Icelandic chieftains some two hundred years after the introduction of Christianity. On the other hand, we can make only vague speculations as to what the poem was like during earlier periods.³

Consequently it is not worth speculating about the intentions of the “original” poet of The Sibyl’s Prophecy, although researchers have spent a great deal of time and effort on just this sort of guesswork. We must be content to try and imagine how the poem was received by its thirteenth-century Icelandic audience. This requires, however, that we know something of how Eddic poems in general were performed and how this genre of poetry developed since ancient Germanic times.⁴

Old Germanic poetry, of which the *Edda* is a late example, was performed to the accompaniment of a harp, probably in a sort of incantatory, half-singing delivery somewhere between recitation and actual song. At first the poetry was not divided into regular stanzas but trotted along from line to line, as for example in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, which from a technical standpoint can be regarded as a precursor of Eddie poems:

“Lo! We have heard
the folk-kings’ glory
how those noblemen
Often Scyld Scefing
from many tribes,
of the Spear-Danes,
in days of yore,
made known their courage.
from troops of foes,
took away mead-benches...”⁵

Several poems, including *Beowulf*, give descriptions of wandering singers and harp-players producing even streams of such verses at drinking-parties in the king’s mead-hall before the assembled warriors and courtiers. Their repertory seems to have consisted of long narratives about the gods and heroes of ancient times. At the center of these tales is that same heroic/courtly locale, the mead-hall, where the performance is taking place.⁶ The reference to ‘mead-benches’ in the fifth line of *Beowulf* is a good example of the “double scene” phenomenon: the word functions within the fictive reality of the poem, but at the same time it is directed at the more obvious reality witnessed by the audience as it listens to the recitation.⁷

The oldest surviving poems of this kind are highly formulaic and were probably improvised during the performance itself, like the Yugoslavian heroic songs studied by Parry and Lord. The simple meter of two heavily stressed syllables per line, plus alliteration, made improvisation possible for the singer who had learned in advance a considerable number of formulas and systems. With the aid of the harp he was able to maintain the flow of words in an even and rhythmical manner, filling in the occasional pauses with music.⁸

In the Viking North, however, the genre underwent a radical change, which seems to have resulted primarily from a change in the rules of performance. The harp was set aside and the ancient tales began to be narrated in prose. The Old Germanic verse forms were reserved now for a few highly dramatic scenes and episodes, in which the main characters of the story express their thoughts and feelings in direct speech. As a result, the poems became to a greater extent dialogue or monologue poems, set within prose narratives of varying lengths. At about the same time the verse form developed towards greater regularity and metrical strictness: regular stanzas were introduced, the lines grew shorter, and the diction became more precise and concentrated,

with considerably fewer formulas and repetitions. To improvise poems of this new kind was scarcely possible, but neither was it necessary, for the increasing concentration and brevity made it possible to learn the texts by heart. The manuscripts show clearly that the Eddic poems were written down from more or less completely *memorized* oral texts, rather like the ballads and folk songs of later times.

All of these changes were probably interrelated; they should be perceived as parts of a single development. Thus it is natural to assume that the verses became more strict in form and fixed within the oral tradition as the poetry took on a more limited function, while the prose took over the main part of the narrative. When the harp ceased to be used in performance, poetic improvisation was made difficult but at the same time it became easier for the actor to dramatically perform type-scenes of the sort one finds in the *Edda*: a troll-woman's visionary monologue, a dying hero's last words on the battlefield, a verbal duel between enemies immediately before a battle, etc. And when the poetic text became fixed, instead of improvised with each performance, there was no longer a great need for ready-made formulas.

An Icelandic tale, *Norna-Gests þáttur*,⁹ written down about the year 1300, gives a highly romanticized but interesting picture of what it might have been like when Eddic poems were performed in medieval times. The story takes place at the Norwegian court of King Ólafr Tryggvason around the year 1000. One day an old wanderer, Norna-Gestr ('Guest of the Norns'), comes to the court. The stranger appears to be several hundred years old; he knew the legendary heroes of ancient times and can speak of them. He also knows how to play the harp and recite poems. Shortly before Christmas, when the king's men are seated around the drinking-table, Norna-Gestr offers them entertainment. The first evening he plays his harp for a long while, and makes a bargain with his audience that the next day he will convince them he has seen a treasure more valuable than a certain gold ring which King Ólafr has recently acquired and which the entire court admires. The next day when the king himself is present, Norna-Gestr shows a piece of a golden saddle-ring which everyone must confess is superior to the king's ring. At the king's command, Norna-Gestr relates how he came by this valuable saddle-ring, which apparently was worn by Grani, the legendary horse of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. The story develops into a short version of the saga of the Völsungs and the Rhinegold, interrupted at times by questions from the audience. For his dramatic high points Norna-Gestr employs verse instead of prose and recites Eddic poems as if spoken by the personages in the saga during certain situations: Óðinn's speech to Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, for example, delivered as the young hero is on his way to avenge his father's death; or Brynhildr's monologue, recited during her journey to the kingdom of death, and so on. These poetic speeches are highly dramatic in content and charged with emotion but they do not advance the action any further.

The performance situation described here has a good deal in common with

those presented in the earlier Old English sources: a wandering harp-player entertains drinking warriors with tales about the heroes of ancient times. It is obvious that both literatures refer to the same mythical-heroic tradition of the mead-hall. One can also find parallels to Norna-Gestr as a mythic singer in several places in the earliest Old Germanic literature. In *Norna-Gests þátttr*, however, harp-playing, story-telling and poetic recitation are no longer done simultaneously but at three distinct moments during the entertainment. First the harp is played as an overture; it is followed by a prose narration. At appropriate moments in this narration poetic-dramatic monologues or dialogues are introduced, which scarcely advance the action of the story but which place the characters in dramatic relief. Throughout the entire performance, but especially during the story-telling, a dialogue occurs between the performer, Norna-Gestr, and his audience. The dramatic verse monologues to a large extent are perceived as direct speech from the saga characters to the audience: Óðinn's speech to Sigurðr Fáfnisbani deals more generally with the duties of a warrior, and Brynhildr's death monologue presents the bitterness and craving for revenge of a woman deceived. One may imagine such subjects were of special interest to the circle of drinking courtiers listening to Norna-Gestr's performance.

The setting in which the sagas and Eddic poems were usually performed during thirteenth-century Iceland was no doubt considerably less glamorous than that described in *Norna-Gests þátttr*. There were no royal mead-halls, no golden treasures or centuries-old singers from the mythical past. Nevertheless it was in such a setting that the Icelandic chieftains wished to live. Many of them had served with the Norwegian court and viewed themselves as courtiers of the king. Within their limited economic resources and on farms that were small and poor by continental standards, they tried to realize the mead-hall atmosphere of wealth, heroic grandeur and fine literary entertainment.

There is extant a description of an early twelfth-century entertainment intended for the halls of Icelandic chieftains. The performance is said to have taken place in 1119 on the farm Reykjahólar, where the priest and chieftain Ingimundr Einarsson held a wedding feast for his stepdaughter and invited the notables of the district, among them the major landowner and lawman Hrólfr from Skálarnes:

There was increased merriment and joy now, good entertainment (*skemmtan*) and many sorts of amusements— dancing, wrestling, and storytelling (*sagaskemmtan*). The celebration lasted for seven whole nights, for in any summer when two *sálds* worth of corn could be brought there was an Ólaf's Guild meeting at the Þorsnes Þing, and there were many guild-brothers at the celebration ... About such occasions, it is sometimes reported, though it is not in itself very important, who told stories and about whom stories were told. This is contained in an account which many now deny and pretend not to have known; for many reject the truth, think that what is invented is true ... Hrólfr from Skálarnes told a saga about Hröngvið the viking and about Ólaf, the Liðsmen's King, about the barrow-robber, Þráin the berserk, and about Hrómund Grípsson — with many strophes too. These sagas delighted King Sverri who said such

lying stories were very enjoyable. Men could even trace their lineage back to Hrómund Grípsson. Hrólfr himself had put this saga together. Ingimund the priest told the Saga of Orm the Skáld of Barra, with many verses and, towards the end of the saga, many good *flokks* which Ingimund himself had composed. Furthermore, many wise men believed these sagas were true.¹⁰

The setting as well as the entertainment described here seem to be of a more robust sort than in *Norna-Gests þátttr*. But it seems likely that from a technical standpoint the performance was handled in the same way and the royal mead-hall, judging by the reference to King Sverri, was the ideal setting behind the saga-telling and poetic recitation that took place at the Reykjahólar wedding feast. We may imagine that *Vǫluspá* was recited in a similar setting in twelfth-century Iceland. Formally we have to do with a dramatic monologue told by a fictitious personage, a poem quite like those recited by Norna-Gestr and probably also like those recited by Hrólfr from Skálmarnes and Ingimundr the Priest. In the manuscripts the poem is not presented as an element within a prose narration, but this does not rule out the possibility that it was intended to be performed in such a context.

II

The speaker in the text is a *vǫlva*, a heathen troll-woman with the power to see into what ordinarily is hidden beyond death.¹¹ This sort of troll-woman appears in many of the sagas. She often comes on the scene as a mysterious stranger, quite like Norna-Gestr, and frightens the farmers with her prophecies and visions. One of the most famous descriptions of such a woman appears in *Eiríks saga rauða*:

There was a woman there in the district who was called Þorbjörg; she was a prophetess and was called ‘Little Sibyl’. She had had nine sisters and they had all been prophetesses but she was the only one still living then. It was Þorbjörg’s custom during the winter to attend feasts; she was invited most often by those who were curious to learn about their own destinies or what the next year would bring ... A high-seat was prepared for her with a cushion on it that had to be stuffed with chicken feathers. When she arrived during the evening with the man who had been sent to get her, she was outfitted in this way: she wore a dark cloak fitted with straps and studded with precious stones all the way down to the hem. She wore glass beads around her neck and on her head a black lambskin hood lined with white catskin. She carried a staff with a knob on it, clad in brass and studded with stones. She wore a belt made of touchwood with a large leather pouch hanging from it, in which she kept the charms she needed for her magic ... When she came in, everyone was obliged to greet her appropriately, and she responded according to how agreeable she found them ... Late the following day they provided her with the things she needed to perform the witchcraft (*seiðr*). She asked them to bring her women who knew the incantations needed to perform the witchcraft, known as guardian songs; but no such women could be found. Then they asked around the farm to see if anyone might know. Then Guðríðr answered, “I am neither a prophetess nor a witch, but back in Iceland my foster-mother Halldís taught me incantations which she called guardian songs.” Þorbjörg replied, “Then you are more knowledgeable than I expected.” Guðríðr

said, “This is the sort of knowledge and proceeding where I will not assist anyone, for I am a Christian woman.” Þorbjörg said, “It might be that you would be of help to the people here, and you would then be no worse a woman.” ... The women formed a ring around Þorbjörg where she sat up on the witching platform. Then Guðríðr sang the songs so beautifully and well that no one there thought they had ever heard a more beautiful voice. The prophetess thanked her for the song. She thought many spirits had been drawn there who thought the singing was beautiful to hear; “before they had wanted to turn away from us and pay us no heed. And now many things are clear to me which before were hidden, both from me and from others. And I can say that this famine will not last longer than the winter and conditions will improve with the spring; and the time of sickness which has lain heavy for so long will improve sooner than expected.”¹²

The prophetess who speaks in *Völuspá* is not described and the situation in which she gives her prophecy is never made clear, but one can fairly well imagine the scene using the description quoted above: a strangely dressed old woman sitting in a high-seat, surrounded by a listening audience for whom she describes her visions. The main difference would be the much grander perspective of *Völuspá*. The sibyl’s prophecy does not concern a local famine or epidemic as in *Eiríks saga rauða* but rather the fate of the world from its creation to its final destruction or Ragnarök. She is speaking not to some gathered farmers but to the whole of mankind.

The section of the poem which will be analyzed here represents but an eighth of the whole, and it contains many problems of interpretation which I will only briefly consider. I will be content to illustrate how the reciter of the poem in her role as sibyl constructs in the mind of the audience an image of the creation of Miðgarðr, making use of the effects of the “double scene.”

To begin with we will examine this section in relation to the poem as a whole. In its reconstructed form, *Völuspá* comprises sixty-six stanzas, the majority of which describe a separate scene that the sibyl “sees” during her prophecy. The transitions between scenes are sometimes so abrupt and unexpected as to seem, from a strictly logical point of view, quite arbitrary—which helps to explain the variations in stanza order exhibited by the manuscripts; the degree of variation was probably even greater in the oral tradition. It is clear, however, that the sibyl intends to describe a cyclical development that begins with the light and harmony of the earliest age, proceeds through a series of events towards a fragmented and inharmonious present, reaches its traumatic climax in the great global catastrophe of the future, Ragnarök, and concludes with the creation of a new and better world, as full of light and harmony as the world described in the beginning of the poem. The central but also the most obscure section of the poem describes a gradual falling into sin, a moral degeneration for which the whole of mankind (and this includes the listening audience) is held responsible. The sibyl intends to show that this lapse into sin will doubtless lead to punishment and that the present state of the world is so corrupt that Ragnarök is inevitable. But she gives new hope through her vision of a new world to come after Ragnarök,

where the lost happiness once created by the gods will return through those who are virtuous and pure in heart. Whether one chooses to view *Völuspá* as Christian or heathen, it exhibits to a large extent the character of a revivalist sermon. It is the ethical message rather than the historical pattern of action that connects the flow of visionary scenes.

It follows from this that one cannot expect to find in the poem any 'scientific' explanation of the world's development, nor should one expect any logical consistency or connection between the verses. Internal connections in *Völuspá* lie almost entirely on an emotional plane. From the serene *andante* of the creation myths, the listeners are swept along to the demonic *furioso* of Ragnarök, and from there to a majestic finale where the creation theme returns in a new variation, instilling an intense sensation of catharsis and release; this occurs without enabling one, however, to give a precise account of the series of causes and effects that led up to it. The sibyl quite intentionally obscures the logical sequence to increase the effect of religious mystery.

In the first eight stanzas the logical connections are stronger than in other parts of the poem because the fundamental conditions are being presented. One may reasonably assume that this first section remained relatively unchanged from one recitation to the next. The section opens with a pair of stanzas in which the sibyl introduces herself and the situation in which she addresses the audience. Following this are six stanzas that present the creation of Miðgarðr and Ásgarðr up to the point when the powers of evil (represented by the three women from Jötunheimar) first make their entrance on the scene. Characteristic of this section are antithetically paired stanzas; the first stanza in each pair presents a scene or situation which the next stanza contrasts with a scene or situation of opposite meaning. This arrangement made the verses easier to remember for the reciter and easier to follow for the audience.

As a prerequisite to understanding the poem, the audience had to know its way around the Old Norse mythological cosmos and its cast of characters; this mythology is part of the poem's code. One was expected to know that Miðgarðr, the human world, was an island in the middle of the world-sea, created by Óðinn and his brothers (the sons of Burr). According to *Snorra Edda*, the brothers killed the giant Ymir, whose body was then used as building material. His flesh became earth, his legs mountains, his blood the sea, his hair the forest and his skull the heavens.¹³ Beyond Miðgarðr, which represents civilization and stability, lies Útgarðr, where the giants and other evil beings reside: a world beyond the official and the known. Somewhere in the vicinity of Miðgarðr and likewise connected to the human world lies Ásgarðr, the gods' world, dominated by the Valfather Óðinn's giant mead-hall, Valhøll, the unattainable ideal model for all earthly mead-halls and places of 'entertainment' (*skemtan*).

Here in Valhøll is the official center of the mythic world. Outside is Iðavøllr, where the gods hold the parliament or *þing* in the same way as the

thirteenth-century Icelanders held the Þing on þingvellir. It was here that the gods, according to *Vǫluspá*, played *tafl* with golden playing-pieces when the world was in its infancy. These golden pieces will be found again in the grass when the world is renewed after Ragnarǫk, when most of the gods will have fallen in battle against the giants and their evil crew. Between Miðgarðr and Ásgarðr stands the world-tree, the ash Yggdrasill, which governs human prosperity, its roots stretching out through the entire universe.

The human beings (both high and low) who inhabit Miðgarðr are descended from the god Heimdallr, who in the dawn of time sired children with three different women, who in turn became the tribal mothers for the three Old Norse social groups: nobles, farmers and slaves. The noblemen have closer contact than the others with the gods, especially with the Valfather Óðinn himself, the adviser and role model for kings. With the help of Óðinn they can prevail over their enemies and obtain information about upcoming battles, especially Ragnarǫk's titanic world struggle between the forces of good and evil. One method of obtaining such information is to consult a sibyl, who has a supernatural connection with Óðinn. Another way is to offer sacrifices to the gods in the temple or at the *Þing*.

These methods of obtaining information are necessary to maintain the strength of Miðgarðr and Ásgarðr against Útgarðr's ceaseless attacks and evil stratagems. As is hinted at in the case of Guðrīðr, who was reluctant to sing the guardian songs out of deference to her Christian beliefs, there were difficulties in making magical spirits and sacrifices acceptable in a society which was officially Christian. In *Vǫluspá* one observes this conflict most clearly in the final section, when the new world to come after Ragnarǫk is ruled over by a new god mightier than any of the old Æsir; this is an obvious reference to the Christian God. By thus affirming Christ as the ultimate ruler it was possible for the thirteenth-century Icelanders to preserve the mythic universe they had inherited from their ancestors along with their oral traditions.

We now turn to the text.

III

The sibyl begins her monologue with an invocation to the audience: 'Hear me, all you/ holy kindred.'¹⁴ This is common in oral texts: "Come listen a while you gentlemen all," says the opening of a Robin Hood ballad; a modern song begins, 'Hear my song you clear evening star.' In Eddic poetry this kind of opening is rare. Usually the reciter plunges directly into the course of events: 'Enraged was Ving-Þórr when he awoke ...' (*Þrymskviða*); 'Counsel me now, Frigg,/ for I long to go// to visit Vafþrúðnir ...' (*Vafþrúðnismál*). In *Vǫluspá* the invocation imparts a sense of religious solemnity, a commanding, incantatory voice that breaks through the noise of the banquet hall. By addressing the audience—in reality perhaps a group of drunken farmers—as 'holy kindred,' she transforms them into the equals of the gods and the room

into a temple for magical rites. By doing so she defines the textual code as one of religious solemnity and ritual.

Some commentators maintain that the gods themselves are addressed and that the sibyl's seance should therefore be viewed as taking place in Valhøll or some other supernatural locale. But the most natural way to interpret 'holy kindred' is as synonymous with the 'greater and lesser of Heimdallr's children'; that is, as an allusion to the human social classes descended from Heimdallr,¹⁵ all of which were doubtless represented at a recitation taking place on a chieftain's farm, as we saw in the story of the Reykjahólar wedding feast. The sibyl wants to emphasize that she is addressing both the high and the low of Old Norse society, and when she refers at the same time to the divine origin of all those present, she probably appeals especially to the social aspirations of the lower classes. It may have been that they were seated on the lower benches of the banquet hall, far away from the chieftain's high-seat, but in the sibyl's apocalyptic vision they are offered a seat in the proximity of the gods and nobles.

In her invocation the sibyl addresses not only the audience but also Óðinn: 'You want, Val-father....' By this she makes it clear that she speaks at the request of the god, and this is meant to assert her authority forcefully to the audience. The formulaic epithet 'Val-father' is associated especially with Óðinn's function as a ruler over those slain in battle, known as the *val*. From another Eddic poem, *Baldrs draumar*, we know that Óðinn once rode to the land of the dead and woke a sibyl lying buried in the ground to ask her about the danger threatening the god Baldr. At that time the lord of the Æsir had to beg the sibyl before she would describe her visions, and there are several verses later on in *Völuspá* which indicate that the situation here is the same. As is also clear from the story of sibyl Þorbjörg's seance, it could be necessary for the highest to humble themselves and to offer costly gifts before the seance could begin. All the more reason for the audience to consider itself as taking part in an unusual privilege when the sibyl offers her visions.

In the beginning, though, it seems uncertain whether the sibyl is actually offering something or merely hinting that she possesses a wisdom not accessible to those present. In the first stanza it is only a question of transmitting to the audience the Val-father's wish that she 'tell/ the old tidings of men/ the earliest I can recall.' Later on in the poem she begins to unveil the extent of her knowledge not only about the past but also about the future, while at the same time quite frequently expressing her reluctance to speak. 'Do you want to know more, or not?' is her sullen refrain to the audience in that obscure section which deals with present events and with preparations for Ragnarøk. Her wavering between visionary effusiveness and bitter silence makes for the best dramatic effects in the monologue, which a skillful performer would have understood and exploited not only through the recitation itself (alternating between a fast and slow tempo, between fluent delivery and 'hesitant' staccato), but also through gestures and mimicry.

In the second stanza the sibyl begins to unveil the hidden wonders, but in a way which makes her and the history of the world she relates to the audience seem even more mysterious than before: 'I remember giants/ born long ago// in days of yore/ who fostered me.' Is she therefore older than creation itself, akin to both Ymir and the ancient giants, and is it from them that her wisdom originates? Has she, like Norna-Gestr, wandered among the courtyards for many hundreds of years before arriving at the room where she at this moment is demonstrating her magical arts? Or is she just a common, everyday fortuneteller with obscure visions, which are to be interpreted as memories from a previous existence? The point of the poem is precisely that one should not obtain a clear answer to these sorts of questions.

The 'nine worlds' she claims to remember are perhaps to be seen as continents connected by the roots of Yggdrasil. (According to Snorri's *Prose Edda*, one root extended to Ásgarðr, another to the land of the ancient frost-giants, 'where Ginnungagap once was,' while a third stretched to the desolate netherworld, Niflheimr.)¹⁶ It is also possible that the nine worlds can be seen in one way or another as nine sisters like those sibyl Þorbjörg once had, who apparently had some connection with her troll power. But the phrase is too obscure to be interpreted. We can suppose that there were listeners in thirteenth-century Iceland who were just as mystified as we are. The phrase is *supposed* to be unclear. The main thing is that the audience be able to imagine an obscure cosmic connection in which the world-tree, creation and the sibyl herself exist in such a way that the sibyl's magical wisdom is authenticated for her latter-day audience.

The entire second stanza is perhaps best seen as a first suggestion of the sibyl's repertory, a quick glance at the menu before the main courses are brought to the table, which also imparts a section of the code on the basis of which the rest of the poem should be interpreted. At the same time the stanza's dim and distant past provides an effective contrast with the first stanza's present setting and focus on the performance situation itself. From the farm, with its audience representing the various medieval social classes, we are flung back into a magical first age, where cause and effect can be discerned with no more certainty than in a dream.

With the third stanza we come to the creation narrative itself. Described first is Chaos, or "Ginnungagap," the gaping abyss that existed before the earth's creation. One finds highly interesting parallels to this account in other early Germanic poems dealing with the Creation: in a few Old English Christian poems, and especially in an Old High German prayer, the *Wessobrunner Gebet*, composed in the Old Germanic epic meter. Recurring in these texts is the pattern 'then [before Creation] was found neither sand nor sea, earth nor heaven,' together with the alliterative formula *iQrð fannz æval né upphiminn*, which are found with slight variations in both Old English and Old High German (as well as in other Eddic poems and in a Swedish runic inscription). Based on these parallels the theory was formed that a lost Old

Germanic creation poem, heathen in content, underlay both *Vǫluspá* and *Wessobrunner Gebet*. An alternative theory is that the creation account in *Vǫluspá* is directly or indirectly influenced by the Christianized versions in *Wessobrunner Gebet* and/or the Old English poems.¹⁷

Both of these theories assume that the text of *Vǫluspá* entered the oral tradition at a time when there still existed a unified pan-Germanic culture with literary relations between North Germanic and West Germanic poetry (via a *Volksprache*). The latter theory presupposes in addition a chain of literary influences so complex that any theory based upon it must appear questionable.

With the aid of Parry and Lord's formulaic theory the significance of textual similarities can be explained more simply, without having to posit the existence of literary influences or an original Old Germanic text. The only thing one must hypothesize is that there existed in the Germanic culture an 'inherited' image-complex associated with the formula 'then was found neither earth nor heaven' (*igrð fannz æval né upphiminn*). This image-complex, which does not need to have been particularly extensive (in any case it could be expressed in but a few words), is part of the underlying code of the text and functioned each time poets made it their task to describe the creation of the world. The alliterative formula arose within the poet's consciousness more or less automatically, as part of a traditional thought pattern or arrangement of motifs, ready-made for immediate presentation. According to this model, the stanza in *Vǫluspá* could just as easily have been composed in the thirteenth century as five centuries earlier, even though the basic building-blocks of the verse (especially the collocation *igrð-upphiminn*) are from an earlier date.

The central motif in the stanza is the absence of nature, a motif that sets up the expectation that its antithesis, nature, will appear in the next stanza, and this is indeed what occurs. Everything in these two stanzas must be judged from the standpoint of the difference between Anti-Nature and Nature, or if you will, between Chaos and Cosmos. This does not mean that we must immerse ourselves in a profound theological meditation on the symbolic significance of Ymir and Ginnungagap, looking out upon and situated within an imaginary universe. On the contrary, these details must be judged on the basis of their function in this particular context, and we have no right to assume that the sibyl's thirteenth-century Icelandic audience possessed a much clearer conception of either Ymir or Ginnungagap. Incidentally, one should observe that Ymir is not mentioned by name in one of the three versions, which instead of reading 'when Ymir lived' has the variant 'when nothing existed' (*þat er ekki var*). The main point was not to say something about the ancient mythical giant Ymir; it was to conjure up a time long past when Nature, as the audience knew it from daily life, had not yet begun to exist. As for Ginnungagap, it means literally something along the lines of 'tremendous abyss' or 'gaping maw,' and it was probably not associated with any definite, named locale until around 1230, when *Snorra Edda* systematized

the mythological cosmology using *Völuspá* as its basis.¹⁸ In its poetic context the expression functions as a negative contrast with ‘grass,’ a contrast underscored by the alliterations *gap*, *ginnunga*, *gras*, in the original text. That we now speak of Ginnungagap as a name for Chaos in Old Norse mythology may be due to the purely accidental circumstance that a poet or reciter needed to fill out the verse line with a word beginning with *g*.

Once we have reduced Ymir and Ginnungagap to subordinate elements, it becomes easier to follow the sibyl’s rhetoric. *Ár var alda* is a formula which in the code of Eddic poetry corresponds to the “once upon a time” of fairy tales: an indefinite reference to an ancient age. The added specification in the next line, ‘when Ymir lived’ (or ‘when nothing existed’), leads the audience even further back into the ur-time, to a sort of anti-landscape which in subsequent lines is built up in the mind of the audience through a sequence of negated natural elements: ‘no sand,’ ‘no sea,’ etc. It is hardly a coincidence that the enumeration begins with the barren dust of the earth (sand), continues thereafter with water (sea, cool waves), expands to include both the heavens and the ‘gaping abyss,’ then returns finally to the earth through the most basic and familiar of its life-giving products: the grass.

The products of the soil are of central importance within the agricultural society to which both the sibyl and her audience belong. Without grass there can be no livestock; without livestock there is no food. This vital precondition was familiar to every Icelander from the time of the first settlement to the industrial revolution.

According to *Snorra Edda*, the ancient giant Ymir had a cow, Auðhumla, which gave him sustenance, and which in turn gained sustenance by licking some frost-covered stones. From these stones came forth the god Buri, who begat Burr, who begat Óðinn, Vili and Véi, the three ‘sons of Burr,’ who in turn killed Ymir and created the world from his body. How much of this curious myth lies implicit in the text of *Völuspá* is not easy to say. As it stands one can well imagine that the sibyl and her audience knew the ‘sons of Burr’ only as a name for some faceless mythical figures who in some vague way enabled the world to arise out of the ‘gaping abyss’. Nothing in the poem refers to the origin of the sons of Burr or implies that they killed Ymir.

The most important element in stanza four is in any case not the actors (the sons of Burr) but the transformation which the landscape undergoes. From the word ‘until’ (*áðr*), which connects this stanza antithetically with the previous one, the sibyl conjures up a picture of the world-center which emerges from the abyss described earlier, and out of which vegetation, and thereby also culture, begins to grow. This world-center was perceived as a large room or hall (like the one in which the recitation was taking place?) where the southern sun shines down on a stone floor (*sól scein sunnanl á salar Steina*), from which vegetation now begins to grow like a green carpet. Against the negation in the end of the previous stanza (*gap var ginnungal enn gras hvergi* [the abyss was gaping/ and grass nowhere]) is set a positive counterpart. In

order to emphasize the parallel, this counterpart likewise employs a triple alliteration on *g*: *þá var GRUND GRÓIN/GRÆNUM lauki* [then the ground was overgrown/ with green plants].

The universe of the poem grows ever more intimate and personal. At the same time as the gaping abyss, with its barren absence of grass, is transformed into a hall where the sun is shining upon the grass, the sun itself turns into a personified being with human weaknesses. After having been represented in stanza four as merely a force of nature, the sun is introduced in stanza five as 'the moon's companion,' who in a seemingly whimsical, aimless fashion extends her 'right hand' over the horizon. (That it is precisely her right hand which is extended is probably due to the alliterative demands, and that she extends it 'from the south' is due to both the alliteration and a formulaic parallel with stanza four, verse five.) The sibyl is trying to create an impression of the helplessness and lawlessness of nature, before the gods (as told in the contrasting sixth stanza) established laws for her in the same way as the Icelandic chieftains introduced law and order into their own society. The thrice-repeated key phrase in the latter part of stanza five is *þat né vissi* ('knew it not'), which accentuates personified Nature's confusion and perplexity before the intervention of the gods: 'the sun knew not/ where she had a home// the stars knew not/ where they had places,// the moon knew not/ what might he had.'

Mention of the sun's habitat (or more literally her hall: *hvar hon sali átti*) is of course connected to the hall-metaphor in the previous stanza. The sibyl also establishes an indirect parallel between the forces of nature and the men present in the hall where the sibyl's recitation is taking place. Like these natural forces, human beings ('greater and lesser/ of Heimdallr's sons') did not at first know their place or sense their social rights and obligations. These were made clear for them when their forefathers established laws at the Alþingi. For such legislative acts, the establishment of natural law by the gods stands as an eternal exemplar. The sibyl, however, is not interested in declaring this to her audience directly. She is content to sketch a cosmic vision that makes it possible for the audience to identify with the sun, moon, and stars and at the same time see the resemblance between the gods of creation and the chieftains who presided over the establishment of laws at the Alþingi.

These parallels continue to develop. The ceremonial formula 'Then the powers all went/ to their seats of judgment' is repeated later on in the poem no fewer than three times, each time in a context that emphasizes the holiness and indispensability of the legislative assembly. The gods are characterized as *ginnheilög* (most holy), an expression that suggests both power and a religious nimbus (cf. *ginnunga gap*). They are said to make their decisions seated upon a special type of high-seat, *röcstólar*, 'doom-seats' (cf. *Ragnarök*, doom of the gods), corresponding to the high-seats upon which the Icelandic chieftains were enthroned in their banquet-halls. The legislation enacted by the gods appears to consist mainly in the regulation of planetary motions, so that the

periods of the day (morning, evening, etc.) can from this point on be reckoned and named. Clearly it is the interests of human society, not of the stars and planets, which are the center of attention. It would be useless to attempt to interpret the sibyl's words as some kind of lecture in popular astronomy. It is more useful to interpret her words as an attempt in mythic form to legitimize the divisions of the working day that existed on Icelandic farms during the greater part of the Middle Ages.¹⁹

In stanza seven work is already underway. The Æsir are assembled on Iðavöllum. They construct temples, make smithies and forge tools, just as the first settlers did when they came to Iceland early in the Viking Age. This parallel is not made explicit within the text, but it is a precondition if the sibyl's vision of creation is to strike home for the audience. Consciously or unconsciously, creation is modeled on a mythically expanded and enhanced version of the colonial history of Iceland. The work of the holy fathers is glorified in a sequence of parallel verbs that give an impression of feverish activity: *timbroðo*, *lögðo*, *smíðoðo*, *scópo*, *gordó*. The result of all this activity is both spiritual and material wealth, *auðr*, a word that has the ring of gold and silver.

By way of antithesis there follows in stanza eight an image of the gods carefree and at play with the gold, at the close of the working day: 'They played at tables in the meadow;/ cheerful they were.' This kind of board game, *tafl*, was considered a special pleasure among the Icelandic chieftain class, and in *Völuspá* it stands out as a symbol for the highest and purest joy. When the world has sunk down at Ragnarök and a new and better world has risen from the sea, 'Then will thereafter/ the wondrous// golden game-pieces/ be found in the grass'. The golden playing-pieces and the green grass of the meadow are thus associated together in the sibyl's universe, in a complicated symbol-complex which encompasses both life and death, work and play, happiness and unhappiness. According to the Old Norse mythology, gold is a symbol not just of wealth and happiness, but also of dissension; it is the 'strife-ore' coveted by giants and evil, greedy men.

In the first half of stanza eight, happiness still prevails, but in the second half we are reminded of the demonic qualities of gold via the arrival of the three giant-women. From this point on *Völuspá* becomes darker and more regretful.

Who are these three women? Some scholars identify them with the three Norns, the goddesses of fate. Other prefer to see them as representations of the feminine vanity which drives men to squander their wealth.²⁰ The latter interpretation stems from the description of the golden age in *Snorra Edda*:

[they used] so copiously the metal known as gold that they had all their furniture and utensils of gold, and that age is known as the golden age, until it was spoiled by the arrival of the women. They came from Giantland.²¹

The text of *Völuspá* doesn't permit a single solution to this problem of

interpretation, but the problem is hardly crucial for an understanding of the poem on an emotional level. That the three women represent something evil that threatens the order and well-being of creation—this much is quite clear. Throughout the entire poem the giants symbolize chaos and evil; this applies equally to Ymir and the giants who oppose the gods in the Ragnarøk section. At the same time, however, the giants are in possession of great wisdom and magical abilities which often make it necessary to win their friendship. As she herself declares, the sibyl is kin to the gods, or in any case was fostered by them. This implies that one can read a note of triumph into her account of the disappearance of the golden age, a note of triumph which further on is expressed by the repeated formula, ‘do you want to know more, or not’ (*vitoð er enn, eða hvat?*). Like sibyl Þorbjörg in *Eiríks saga rauða*, she maintains a distance from her audience, and at times even enjoys watching them suffer.

What takes place in the poem’s first eight stanzas can be summed up as follows. In her role as a heathen fortuneteller, the reciter exhorts her audience of Icelandic farmers, chieftains, and thralls to listen to an account of ancient destinies which Óðinn requested her to relate. She boasts about her age and wisdom; she conjures up out of the past an ur-time when nature and vegetation did not exist; she describes how Miðgarðr rose up and grew green, as if she were describing the construction of a chieftain’s banquet-hall. Subsequent parallels are carried through in a manner that emphasizes the similarities between the creation work of the gods and the constitutional development of the Icelandic free state during the Age of Settlement. The first time period is described as a happy golden age but the peace is interrupted by the arrival of three troll-women from the land of the giants who direct our attention to the sibyl and the disquieting effect she has on the agrarian culture she visits with her prophecies.

IV

The chieftain’s residence or mead-hall also plays an important role in later parts of *Völuspá*. The regions of death that are described (Valhøll as well as Hel, and the land of the giants as well as that of the dwarves) all bear a resemblance to the particular milieu of the chieftains, where the drinking horn goes round, the harp resounds, and relics from the ancient time are admired. Ragnarøk itself is heralded with harp-strokes and the sound of trumpets. And in the new world which arises after Ragnarøk, honest men will gather in a new hall, Gimlé, ‘fair as the sun/ and adorned with gold.’

These myths are a romantic projection of the audience’s reality. Or, as the great anthropologist Malinowski expressed it, “myths are charters for social action.”²² They function as models for a legitimization of the social forces governing our lives.

For the thirteenth-century Icelanders, the colonial period or Age of Settlement (ca. 870–930) was a golden age. During that time both the land and political power were equitably divided among different family interests. It

is true that from the beginning there was a special class of farmers, the chieftains, who had more power than the rest, but the difference between a chieftain and an ordinary farmer was not so great that it made for an important class distinction. Ordinary farmers also took part in the political decision-making process at the Alþingi. There was no powerful state that could favor the chieftain at the expense of the farmers' freedom; there existed no centralized authority at that time. Peace and prosperity prevailed throughout the land. Even nature and the climate were said to contribute to the overall well-being: the fields yielded up a good harvest and forests were still to be found to provide building materials for the farmers.

The family feuds that are described in the Icelandic sagas developed during the latter part of the tenth century and continued throughout the entire free state period, that is, to the end of the thirteenth century. In the beginning it was a question of small local feuds that on the whole seemed to have concerned pasturing rights, land boundaries, inheritances and other economic and domestic matters. In the twelfth century, however, the conflicts and class differences intensified as the chieftains acquired more land and more political power owing to, among other things, their newly acquired rights as church leaders to collect tithes and revenue from church estates. In the thirteenth century the economic and social position of the farmers deteriorated considerably and power lay in the hands of a few wealthy chieftain-families who were engaged in a constant state of civil war. At the same time agricultural conditions deteriorated to such an extent that farmers became progressively more dependent on grain imported from Norway. This situation eventually led to the establishment of a centralized government under control of the Norwegian king. The chieftains who emerged victorious from the feuds were transformed into officers of the king. The rest of the population sank to a colonial status first under Norwegian and then under Danish domination. The free state and the old clan-based society collapsed.²³

At the time when *Völuspá* was written down, the free state still existed, together with the old laws from the Age of Settlement, but signs of disaster were already discernable. The chieftains, in order to further their interests, found it necessary to legitimize their newly acquired power over the farmers and to explain away the national crisis as a result of the evil intrigues of outside agitators, or the moral decadence of individual citizens. The literary entertainments which the chieftains offered up in their banquet-halls were to a large extent intended to serve this purpose. First and foremost this was accomplished through the sagas, in which the leading chieftain-families were glorified and their status historically legitimized via their connections with the golden Age of Settlement and the famous Norwegian hero-kings of heathen times. This could be accomplished either through heathen myths or revivalist preaching—elements which are combined together in the sibyl's visionary monologue.

The interests of the chieftains were to a large extent supported by the

clergy. It is true that there existed a powerful faction within the Icelandic church that wanted freedom from the economic and legal domination of the chieftains, and therefore sought support in canon law and in the papal authority's claims for exclusive control of church property. But during the thirteenth century many priests were too dependent on the chieftains to be able to pursue such a catholic policy. Many of them belonged to the leading chieftain-families or were bound to them as scribes or house chaplains. On the whole the cultural heritage claimed by the chieftains seems to have been accepted, though not without certain reservations. Without the co-operation of the clergy, the Germanic myths and glorification of heathen ancestors would never have made it onto parchment, and poems like *Vǫluspá* would never have been recited in Christian homes.

In the doctrine of natural revelation, as expounded for instance in Paul's letter to the Romans, Christian men sought a legitimation for cultivating their heathen cultural inheritance. According to Paul, the heathens, too, were able to divine the presence of the Christian God and His law was revealed in their hearts. In Iceland this doctrine was embodied in a view that the Old Norse mythology was subordinate to a 'higher' belief in an unknown creative power 'which created the sun and rules over all.' This conception is developed for instance in the prologue to *Snorra Edda*, in several sagas and in *Landnámabók*, an account of the colonization period.²⁴ The same conception is expressed clearly in the conclusion of *Vǫluspá*, where the sibyl, after having mentioned the life of the righteous in the golden hall of Gimlé, says: 'Then comes the mighty one/ to divine judgment// the power from above/ who governs all.' This stanza appears in only one of the manuscript versions, but the thought itself is quite consistent with the poem's religious tone and general tendency to make parallels between heathen and Christian elements. In 'The Sibyl's Prophecy,' the coming of the giant-women corresponds to the Christian deluge, Ragnarǫk to the Last Judgment, the hall of Gimlé to the New Jerusalem, Baldr to Christ.²⁵ Such parallels could scarcely have escaped the attention of the thirteenth-century Christian audience.

More important than these mythological parallels, however, is the parallel between the world the sibyl describes and the social reality in which her audience participates. What the audience of *Vǫluspá* experiences during the recitation is the way in which the happy realm of the Age of Settlement collapses but is established anew, provided one accepts the hierarchy of worth that prevails in the chieftain's banquet hall.

V

The interpretation given here builds on the assumption that *Vǫluspá* should be seen as an expression of the milieu of thirteenth-century Icelandic chieftains rather than, for example, of the militaristic milieu of the Germanic migrations or the agricultural society of the Viking Age. That this is an uncertain assumption is readily acknowledged. Many stanzas in the poem, perhaps the

majority of them, may have existed for several hundred years before being written down, and we cannot rule out the possibility that the stanzas were recited not only on the larger farms but in ordinary farmhouses as well. In addition, many of the motifs are so archetypal or universal that they may be supposed to have engaged an audience from almost any milieu.

The specific combination of formulas and motifs, however, that we encounter in the thirteenth-century written texts of *Vǫluspá* fits in readily with the milieu described here and in corroborating accounts of performances of Eddic poetry. Passages that have been regarded by other commentators as obscure, fragmentary survivals of an older ur-text (e.g. references to Chaos and Ginnungagap) can more naturally be explained on the basis of Parry and Lord's formulaic theory and on the interplay between the reciter/sibyl and a thirteenth-century Icelandic audience. Why should we not content ourselves with this? Why complicate matters by postulating a several-hundred-year-old oral textual tradition which in any case can never be verified? Why not content ourselves with trying to reconstruct the message received by an audience in the thirteenth century, when the text was performed and heard?

One may further illustrate this problem-complex with a modern parallel. As is well known, Richard Wagner made use of *Vǫluspá* when he created *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for the German opera-going audience of the 1870's. From the formulas and motifs of the Old Norse poem, however, Wagner created a whole new structure that can only be comprehended against the backdrop of operatic technique and the social conditions affecting both Wagner and his audience: he utilized the symbolism of the golden age to express, among other things, his attitude toward capitalism in the Germany of his time. This has been grasped equally well by those who, without a detailed knowledge of *Vǫluspá*, have studied Wagner and his age. An analysis of precisely which phrases and formulas Wagner borrowed from *Vǫluspá* and which he created himself would be of some interest for our comprehension, but a rather limited interest beside that of studying the conventions at work in the opera itself and in its social milieu. Do we not then have the right to consider *Vǫluspá* according to the same principles by which we consider *Der Ring*—that is, as a *performance*, as a *social event*, and not merely as a philological ruin, the ground plan of which we are obliged to restore?

Notes

1. [Translated from Lars Lönnroth, *Den dubbla scenen: Muntlig diktning från Eddan till ABBA* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1978), ch. 2 "Midgårds grundläggning (*Vǫluspá* 1–8)," 29–52; notes p. 401. I am indebted to the Fulbright Foundation and the Icelandic Ministry of Education for funding a year's stay in Iceland during which time I drafted this translation, and to Karin Holgersson for her assistance. *PA*]

2. [The text of stanzas 1–8 and Lönnroth's Swedish translation are here omitted. Lönnroth cites the original from Gustav Neckel, ed., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*. I: Text. 1914. 4th ed. rev. Hans Kuhn. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1962. *PA*]

3. On establishing the text and the interpretation of *Völuspá* generally, see Sigurður Nordal, ed. *Völuspá*. Reykjavík, 1923 [rev. 1952. Tr. B.S. Benediktz & John McKinnell. Durham and St. Andrews Medieval Texts, 1. Durham & St. Andrews: Durham & St. Andrews Universities, 1978; see also Ursula Dronke, ed. and tr. *The Poetic Edda*. IL *Mythological Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.]
4. See my article “Hjálmar’s Death-Song and the Delivery of Eddic Poetry, *Speculum* 46 (1971): 1–20.
5. [Translation mine. Lönnroth cites the Swedish translation of Björn Collinder (Stockholm, 1955). *PA*]
6. See among others Andreas Haarder, *Beowulf: The Appeal of a Poem* (Aarhus, 1975).
7. [The idea of “den dubbla scenen” or the double scene provides the unifying concept for Lönnroth’s book-length survey of oral literature and performance. In a later article written in English, Lönnroth defines the term as follows: “A double scene is something that occurs in the course of an oral performance whenever the narrative appears to be enacted by the performer or his audience on the very spot where the entertainment takes place” (“The Double Scene of Arrow-Odd’s Drinking Contest,” in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen, et al. [Odense: Odense University Press, 1979], 94–119 at 95). *PA*]
8. For a more detailed account of the *Beowulf* criticism inspired by Parry and Lord, see especially Francis P. Magoun, “The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry,” *Speculum* 28 (1953): 446–67; as well as Haarder, 178–204.
9. The text is found in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, et al. (Reykjavík, 1944), 384–98. [English translation by N[ora] Kershaw [Chadwick], *Stories and Ballads of the Far Fast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 14–37.]
10. Text in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, et al. (Reykjavík, 1946). 1:27 [English trans. from *Sturlunga Saga*, trs. Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas (New York: Twayne, 1970, 1974), 2:43–44]. Discussed by Peter Foote in “Sagnaskemtan: Reykjahólar 1119,” *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 14.3 (1955–56): 226–39 [reprinted with Postscript in his *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1984), 65–83].
11. [For more on the figure of the *völva*, see the essay by Quinn in this volume. *PA*]
12. Text in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík, 1935), 208. Detailed commentary by Dag Strömback, *Sejd: Textstudier i religionshistoria* (Uppsala, 1935). [English translation mine. *PA*]
13. *Gylfaginning*, chs. 6–7. [Tr. Anthony Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson: Edda* (London: Dent, 1987), 11–12.]
14. [English translation mine for this and all subsequent Eddic quotations. *PA*]
15. On the differing interpretations of this stanza, see Nordal. Heimdalr is described as the forefather of the tripartite social system in the poem *Rígsþula*. [See the essay by Thomas D. Hill reprinted in this volume. *PA*]
16. *Gylfaginning*, ch. 15. [Tr. Faulkes, 17.]
17. Cf. Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1957), 2nd ed., 2:361. My own interpretation of the problem is given in my article “*Iðrð fannz áva né upphiminn*: A formula analysis,” *Speculum norroenum*, ed. Ursula Dronke, et al. (Odense, 1981), 310–327.
18. In a late medieval manuscript of Adam of Bremen’s ecclesiastical history the name “Ghimmedegop” is given for an abyss in the North Atlantic where the ocean drops down. Cf. de Vries.
19. See Sam Owen Jansson’s entry, “Dygn (och dess indelning),” in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon för nor disk middelalder* 3 (1958): cols. 389–94.
20. See Nordal.
21. *Gylfaginning*, ch. 4. [Tr. Faulkes, 16.]
22. [See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1926), 89. *PA*]
23. A Marxist interpretation of this development is given in Einar Olgeirsson, *Från ättensamhälle till klasstat* (PAN/Norstedts, Stockholm, 1971). A more traditional and national-

romantic conception is presented in Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Sturlungaöld* (Reykjavík, 1940) [Tr. Jóhann S. Hannesson, *The Age of the Sturlungs: Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century*, Islandica 36 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953)]. The most recent and at the same time most well-balanced introduction to the social system of the Saga Age is given in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga og samfund. En indføring i oldislandsk litteratur* (Copenhagen, 1977) [Tr. John Tucker, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1993)].

24. See my article “The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969): 1–29.

25. On the relationship between heathen and Christian in *Völuspá* see especially Nordal, and Axel Olrik, *Ragnarök, die Sagen vom Weltuntergang* (Berlin, 1922).

“Gunnkǫð and the Precious Mead” (*Hávamál*)

Svava Jakobsdóttir

Translated by Katrina Attwood

Hávamál

Hávamál is the longest of the Eddic poems, very likely consisting of originally separate works, unified by the god Óðinn who speaks with increasing frequency in the course of the poem. Scholars now normally divide *Hávamál* into several parts: the Gnostic Poem (sts. 1–103), a collection of common-sense observations about social conduct, placed in the setting of a hall; the Gunnkǫðepisode (sts. 104–110), telling allusively the story of Óðinn’s quest to obtain the mead of poetry; *Loddfáfnismál* (sts. 111–37), further gnostic advice given to a listener called Loddfáfnir; *Rúnatal* (sts. 138–45), the story of how Óðinn gained the runes for the gods; and *Ljóðatal* (sts. 146–64), a list of spells which Óðinn knows. Certain of the constituent parts of *Hávamál*, especially the advice in the Gnostic Poem and the allusions to Óðinn’s self-sacrifice in the *Rúnatal*, are considered to be among the oldest surviving Eddic verse, although a number of scholars have maintained that they can identify post-Conversion material in the Gnostic Poem. The main meter is *ljóðaháttur*, which is typical of wisdom poetry, but some sections are composed in *mála-háttur* (sts. 81–3, 85–7, 89–90), *galdratalag* (st. 105), or they are metrically irregular.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries *Hávamál*-scholarship was mainly concerned with trying to establish, by means of excision, rearrangement and sometimes addition from other wisdom verse, the outlines of the original *Hávamál*. It was only after the Second World War that scholars began to concentrate on finding ways of reading the text as it is preserved in Codex Regius, rather than trying to improve it; a landmark study is von See 1972b. Larrington’s 1993 study of *Hávamál* in relation to other Icelandic and Old English wisdom poems sets the work in a comparative literary context; the poem is subjected to close reading in Chapter Two. North also offers a discussion of the unity and structure of the poem; Evans’s introduction gives a close account of the different sections of *Hávamál*, discussing questions of date and possible Christian influence. Other scholars have compared the

social wisdom of the early part of *Hávamál* and the *Loddfáfnismál* to the ethics of the sagas, concluding that the advent of Christianity to Scandinavia had made very little difference to the norms by which most people seemed to conduct their lives (Andersson; van den Toorn; Karlsson).

Is *Hávamál* genuinely pagan in all its different sections, or have gnostic observations from Christian Europe been absorbed into the discussions of friendship, appetite, men and women, and others? And how would we detect them, if this were the case? Key arguments for extra-Scandinavian sources are reviewed in Larrington 1992. If the poem continued to evolve up until the moment when it was recorded in the Codex Regius, absorbing new material from Latin school-texts and their Icelandic translations, as suggested in von See 1972a and countered in Larrington 1993, how confident can we be that the mythological elements of the poem (Óðinn's adventures with Gunnlǫð, the self-sacrifice on the tree, the list of spells) are to be regarded as reliable evidence of pagan belief and story? Von See has engaged in debate with *Hávamál*'s most recent editor, David Evans, on the presence of Latin and Christian elements in the poem, and on the understanding of its social wisdom as common sense (von See 1987, 1989; Evans 1989). Fewer recent scholars have dealt with the obscure and difficult mythological elements in *Hávamál*. Fleck has argued for an interpretation of Óðinn's ordeal on the tree as paralleling shamanistic practices reported by ethnologists: hanging upside-down is a widely-attested means of obtaining wisdom. Svava Jakobsdóttir's article, reproduced here for the first time in English, examines the mythic kernel of the winning of the mead of poetry, related across the poem in two parts, sts. 13–14 and 104–110. Svava's researches led her to write a best-selling novel *Gunnlaðar saga*, in which sacred kingship and the *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage) are central to an idyllic and matriarchal Bronze age, brought to a violent end by the theft of the sacred regalia by the kingly candidate, Óðinn. A parallel storyline in the novel, set in modern Copenhagen, shows the consequences of Óðinn's theft still being felt in the present day.

Insights drawn from the study of comparative mythology have, in the past, been regarded as useful in illuminating some obscure parts of the Eddic mythological system. Although the approach is less used by scholars nowadays (with Ursula Dronke as a notable exception), replaced very often by methodologies drawn from anthropology (see Clunies Ross in this volume), Svava's article uncovers some striking parallels between Norse, Irish and Indian myth, suggesting that Snorri's account of the theft of the mead is insufficient to help us interpret this difficult part of *Hávamál*. The idea of the sacred marriage contracted between the king and his kingdom which, as Gro Steinsland has recently suggested, informs other Eddic poems (*Skirnismál* and *Hyndluljóð*), may also lie at the heart of *Hávamál*.

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Gunnǫð and the Precious Mead

I

The central event in my novel *Gunnlaðar saga* is the king's consecration and the ceremony associated with it, in which the goddess grants the king authority to reign with libations and 'holy embraces'.¹ This scene was the product of my research into the stanzas in *Hávamál* which are concerned with

Óðinn and Gunnlǫð. I tried out my interpretation on Gísli Sigurðsson while *Gunnlaðar saga* was in preparation, and it must not have seemed too wrong-headed to him since he adopts it in his edition of *Vǫluspá* and *Hávamál* and acknowledges me in the introduction. I thus find myself obliged to him and to readers of the edition to explain this interpretation and to provide some evidence to support my conclusion. Such an explanation may be as superfluous to the readers' understanding of the novel as *Hávamál* is to the sons of giants,² except insofar as they are interested in it. But it might be necessary, as a result of my speculations, to draw wider inferences from stanzas 104–110 of *Hávamál* than Gísli does in his edition.

Scholars and lay people alike will be most familiar with the traditional account of the mead of poetry which may be found in *Snorra Edda*: Óðinn acquires the mead by seducing Gunnlǫð into making love to him. First, Óðinn disguises himself under the pseudonym Bölverkr and tricks his way to Gunnlǫð, because Suttungr has denied him the mead. He has Baugr bore through the rock, and creeps into the augur-hole in the form of a snake. Then:

Fór Bölverkr þar til sem Gunnlǫð var ok lá hjá henni þrjár nætur, ok þá lofaði hon honum að drekka af miðinum þrjá drykki. Í inum fyrsta drykk drakk hann allt ór Óðreri, en í ǫðrum ór Boðn, í inum þriðja ór Són, og hafði hann þá allan mjǫðinn. (ed. Faulkes 1998, 1:4)

(Bolverk went to where Gunnlod was and lay with her for three nights and then she let him drink three draughts of the mead. In the first draught he drank everything out of Odrerir, in the second out of Bodn, in the third out of Son, and then he had all the mead; tr. Faulkes, 63).

Óðinn assumes the form of an eagle and flies away with the poetic mead as fast as he can. Suttungr flies after him, also in an eagle's shape.

Most scholars and interpreters of *Hávamál* are confident that Snorri's account is a reasonably reliable source concerning the relations between Gunnlǫð and Óðinn, and that we may therefore refer to it to explain the more obscure aspects of *Hávamál*. Thus David Evans says in his edition of *Hávamál* (80–1) :

Gunnlǫð is known in Norse legend only as the daughter of the giant Suttungr, who had acquired the sacred mead of poetry from the dwarfs Fjalarr and Galarr; Óðinn wins the mead by seducing her. The story is related in 104–110 below, and in Snorri's *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál* ch. 5–6).

The belief that sts. 104–110 tell how Óðinn acquires the mead by seducing Gunnlǫð, even though there is in fact no evidence for it, is remarkably tenacious. Most scholars avail themselves of this explanation whenever the mead of poetry is mentioned, as if it were irrefutably proven, and yet neither account has been fully explained. It has virtually become customary to speak of the theft of the mead as one of Óðinn's amorous adventures.

Theories suggesting that the *Hávamál* account represents an independent version of the myth about the poetic mead seem to have reached a dead end. It

is a long time since M. B. Richert put forward the view that the *Hávamál* episode describes the marriage of Gunnlǫð and Óðinn (Richert, 9–20). Scholars have not generally agreed with this interpretation, and Richert did not set the ‘marriage’ in either a religious or a mythological context. It is clear that it is no traditional marriage. De Vries’ opinion concerning the ancient appearance of these stanzas of *Hávamál* also appears to have received little or no support. He believed that the use of the *galdralag* metre indicates that the poet wanted to foreground the nuances of seriousness and solemnity characteristic of religious ceremonies (de Vries 1941, 1:161).

It is clear that the *Hávamál* stanzas in question must be examined, once and for all, without the help of Snorri Sturluson. It seems to me that they will remain obscure if we turn to Snorri uncritically for explanation and read into the poem on the basis of the younger work. It may well be that many points of *Hávamál* seem obscure only because attempts are made to force them into fixed conceptions imported from other times and places—or perhaps because of simple misunderstandings.

In his book *Myth and Religion of the North*, Turville-Petre compares the plots of both *Hávamál* and Snorri’s account with the intention of showing how they disagree. From such a comparison, Turville-Petre believes, we may discover something about Snorri’s method and his use of sources (35–7). For me, however, it is not important to research Snorri’s methodology, nor his multi-faceted story about the mead of poetry; rather, using Turville-Petre’s method as a guide, I intend to direct the spotlight onto *Hávamál* in order to clear undesirable influences from Snorri away from its interpretation. If such a comparison were to bring *Hávamál* into sharper focus, it would then be possible to examine it with a more open mind and come nearer to understanding its actual core.

II

In the *Hávamál* account, it is clear that Óðinn does not break into Suttungr’s realm, nor does he conceal his presence. There is nothing underhanded about this journey; quite the opposite. The text is so vibrant that one hears Óðinn’s puffed-up arrogance:

Inn aldna iǥtun ec sótta; nú em ec aptr urn kominn;
fát gat ec þegiandi þar;
mǫrgum orðom mæltu ec í minn frama
í Suttungs sǫlom. (st. 104)

(I visited the old giant, now I’ve come back, I didn’t get much there from being silent; with many words I spoke to my advantage in Suttung’s hall.)³

In the next stanza, Gunnlǫð is brought into the narrative, pouring out the precious mead. The first *helmingr* of the stanza is bright and clear and has a true, fixed form, reminiscent of openness and ritual rather than of secretiveness and deception. The description is uniquely pictorial in its simplicity

and bears little relation to the secret assignation in a dismal mountain nook described by Snorri (st. 105): “Gunnlǫð mér um gaf / gullnom stóli á / drycc ins dýra miðar.”

I translate these lines as follows: “Gunnlǫð on the golden chair gave me a drink of the precious mead.” Most of the scholars and translators who have taken a stand on the matter of who sits in the golden chair seem to take the view that it is Óðinn himself. But in order to force Óðinn onto the chair it is also necessary to force the Icelandic language. It accords most naturally with a sense of the Icelandic language to see the subject (Gunnlǫð) on the golden chair. Later, I will come to material points which support this reading. But if this section is read in this obvious and natural way, a picture emerges revealing Gunnlǫð in a noble, even ritualistic, light.

Snorri does not mention the golden chair, nor the ring-oath sworn by Óðinn (*Háv.* 110): “Baugeið Óðinn / hygg ec at unnit hafi; / hvat scal hans trygðom trúa?” (I thought Odin had sworn a sacred ring-oath; how can his word be trusted?). This difference between the two versions is here readily apparent and requires no further discussion.

In both versions, it appears that Gunnlǫð grants Óðinn a drink of the mead and sleeps with him (*Háv.* 108: 6 “þeirar er logðomc arm yfir” [who laid her arm over me]). Snorri, however, mentions three nights, and the mead is in three containers: the pot Óðrerir and the two vats Son and Boðn. Only Óðrerir is mentioned in *Hávamál*. Opinion has been somewhat divided as to whether the noun Óðrerir in *Háv.* 107 refers to the mead or to the vessel. Turville-Petre and Evans consider that Óðrerir is a name for the mead, while Gísli Sigurðsson reckons that it is the vessel itself, and I am in agreement with his interpretation. The noun Óðrerir also occurs in st. 140 of *Hávamál*, where it is said that Óðinn receives a drink of the precious mead after having hung on the *vindgameiði* (gallows) for nine nights: “oc ec drycc of gat / ins dýra miðar, / ausinn Óðrerir” (and I got a drink of the precious mead, poured from Óðrerir). Most scholars would consider it likely that Óðrerir in st. 140 refers to the vessel, so it seems reasonable to do so in st. 107, assuming in this instance an internal continuity in *Hávamál*. It is very significant, however, that *Hávamál* does not mention the eagle at all, and there is no indication that Óðinn steals the mead itself and spits it out in Ásgarðr, as it says in Snorri. No conclusion can be drawn from *Hávamárs* account other than that Óðinn steals the vessel out of which the drink is ladled.

Turville-Petre (37) considers that the most significant difference between the two accounts consists in the fact that, in *Hávamál*, Óðinn uses Rati—whether that is an awl or something else—to get out of Suttungr’s realm, whereas, in Snorri, he uses it to get in. It is clearly worth paying particular attention to this detail. Apart from anything else, it supports the view that *HávamáPs* Óðinn does not come in secrecy; he has legitimate business in the ancient giant’s hall. In *Hávamál*, his journey to the hall is not thought worth describing, since it is the robbery and the escape that is the focus of the

account. But then the question arises of how the word *bglverkr* in st. 109 should be understood. Is it a pseudonym, as it is in Snorri's account?

In st. 109, we are told how the frost-giants come 'the next day'—that is, the day after the 'wedding'—to ask for news: "at Bqlverki þeir spurðo, / ef hann væri með bñndom kominn/ еда hefði hánom Suttungr of sóit" (they asked about Bolverk, whether he was amongst the gods, or whether Suttung had slaughtered him.) Prior to this stanza, Óðinn had been the speaker for five stanzas, narrating the course of events from his point of view. In sts. 109 and 110, the viewpoint shifts. The poet or narrator speaks in these stanzas, and Óðinn is discussed in the third person; the stanzas represent a kind of epilogue (st. 109) and an altogether mournful appraisal of the oath-breaking (st. 110). It is not only the viewpoint which changes, but also the spirit of the poem. A second voice has taken over.

The word *bqlverkr* obviously means 'he who does evil work, villain'; it is not used in *Hávamál* until the plot is complete and the evil deed is done. In the manuscript, capital letters are not used except at the beginning of stanzas. It is therefore not possible to deduce from the orthography whether *bqlverkr* is to be understood as a proper noun, which has served as a pseudonym, or whether it is a name which the narrator himself chooses for Óðinn, after the evil deed has been done. By this point, both the narrator and the audience are fully aware of the robbery, and the narrator can, because of the content and the context, call the thief a villain without the need for further explanation. The poet, or narrator, is here explaining in his own words that the frost-giants come to ask about the villain. It may be that this is the original occurrence of *Bqlverkr*, which attached itself to Óðinn as a *heiti*, and that the theory about the pseudonym is an explanation from later times.

As far as the mead itself is concerned, it is worth noting that nowhere in *Hávamál* is it either associated with the art of poetry or intended particularly for poets and scholars, as it is in *Snorra Edda*. In the two stanzas where it is mentioned, stanzas 105 and 140, it is not called anything other than "inn dýri miqðr" (the precious mead). *Hávamál*'s precious mead is able to do something other than make men into poets or scholars.

If one can only restrain oneself from turning to Snorri and reading into the *Hávamál* text, it becomes clear that the accounts have little in common. Besides the name Óðrerir, they share only two details: the fact that Gunnlqð goes to bed with Óðinn, and that she gives him mead to drink. The settings, too, are different. In *Hávamál*, the action takes place on a grand, open stage: a woman on a golden chair pours out for Óðinn the precious mead, which he appears to have won by means of his preeminence as well as his subsequent sacred oaths. But in the master storyteller Snorri's account, these shared details are crammed into two sentences set almost in a vacuum, and the style is as lively as the setting; the bare details are sandwiched between vigorous and imaginative mythological narratives where magic and shape-changing are par for the course. Would Snorri have passed up such picturesque and

magnificent features as a golden chair and a ring-oath if he had known about them?

But even though the gist of the story in *Hávamál* has been lost in the course of its long journey to Snorri, it is clear from these similarities between the versions that the two details (Gunnlǫð's sexual union with Óðinn and her giving him mead) are essential motifs which have been preserved together and must be related to each other. Unless we study them in tandem, we risk losing our way.

Our exploration of this topic leads next to the tradition of Celtic tales about ancient royal consecration ceremonies. In this series of Irish stories, we find not only a ceremony which encompasses both of the key motifs of the Gunnlǫð-legend—a woman (the goddess) who grants the king-figure (or hero) mead and goes to bed with him—but also a golden chair or its equivalent, the high-seat. The goddess (or her personification) is called 'Sovereignty,' and she grants the king authority to reign with a 'sacred marriage.' These Celtic legends are found throughout European medieval literature, and they become the main feature of stories about the Grail-Quest, the Waste Land and the powerful Fisher-King. The research of scholars in Celtic and Indian lore demonstrates that we are dealing with a traditional story motif which is widespread among the Indo-European peoples, and that we may trace its development through historical sources and legends back into the shadowy prehistory of the East.

III

The oldest Irish story of this kind must be *Baile in Scáil* (*The Phantom's Frenzy*). It concerns a legendary king called Conn Cétchathach. One day, Conn goes up onto the ramparts of the royal residence at Tara with his three druids and his court poet; it is his custom to do this every day in order to find out whether the people from the secret hills or the Fomorians⁴ are going to make a surprise attack on Ireland. That day, a heavy fog closes in suddenly. A man comes riding out of the fog and asks Conn to go home with him. He takes him to a wide plain where a golden tree is growing. There is a house thirty paces long with a ridge-beam made of white gold. They go inside and see a maiden sitting on a crystal throne, wearing a golden crown on her head. In front of her is a silver cauldron with golden horns. Beside her there is a golden tub and in front of her is a golden cup. They also see the secret king Lug in his high-seat, and the story says that people in Tara never saw so distinguished a man. He tells them that he has come from the kingdom of the dead to tell Conn how long he and his descendants after him will rule in Tara. It is clear from this that the King in Tara is the supreme king of Ireland. The story continues:

The girl was [Flaith Érenn] the Sovranty of Ireland, and she gave food to Conn, the rib of an ox and the rib of a hog. The oxrib was twenty-four feet long and eight feet from the arch to the ground. When she went to serve the ale, she asked

to whom the cup of red ale (*derg flaith*) should be given, and the Phantom [Lug] answered her. When he had named every prince from the time of Conn onward, Cesarn wrote them down in ogam on four staves of yew (Dillon, 107–9).⁵

Then the fog lifted, and they were back home in Tara.

The Irish scholar O’Rahilly tells a version of the same tale, in which the account of the maiden’s dispensing the ale is clearer and more closely recalls the description in *Háv.* 140: (“oc ec drycc of gat / ins dýra miaðar, / ausinn Óðrerir” [and I got a drink of the precious mead, poured from Óðrerir]). O’Rahilly’s version is as follows:

In *Baile in Scáil* we find her depicted as a lady wearing a golden crown and seated on a crystal throne, having before her a vat of red liquor, from which she pours a draught into a gold cup which she hands to each successive king of Ireland (O’Rahilly 1946b, 14).

R.S. Loomis’s version of the tale of Sovereignty and Conn differs only slightly from O’Rahilly’s version but is even more similar to *Háv.* 140 (Loomis, 220–22).⁶ In his version, the silver barrel full of red ale is standing next to Sovereignty, along with a golden ladle and a golden cup. As Sovereignty ladles the ale into the cup, she asks who should receive the golden ale. Finnur Jónsson (1924, 148) maintains that “*ausinn Óðrerir*” in *Háv.* 140 likewise means “*ladled out of Óðrerir*”. It would of course be necessary to compare the original terms in the Irish manuscript with those in the Icelandic text.

IV

The Irish scholar D. A. Binchy says that the ancient king of Ireland “was originally a sacred personage, tracing his descent from one or other of the ancestral deities and mystically invested with sovereignty by means of immemorial inauguration rites” (cited from Dillon and Chadwick, 93). It is necessary here to explain the notion of sacral kingship, which appears to have been customary among most ancient peoples. In some places, such as Egypt, the king was looked on as a god; in other places he was a demi-god or a descendant of the gods, a kind of mediator between the gods and men. The king’s godlike character determined his role and destiny. He was held responsible, in some mysterious way, for fertility and for the well-being of his subjects and he could be deprived of his kingship, or even his life, if something went wrong. We must simplify matters here, since sacral kingship is a long and complicated business. The most important thing for our purposes is that the king was powerful because of his divinity, and his divinity was asserted in particular ceremonies. In the king’s consecration, ceremonies symbolising death and rebirth and even the recreation of the world were implicit. Thus in India and the Far East, the consecration was associated with the meeting of the old and new years. The drink given to the king in these ceremonies represented nectar from another world, often the underworld. A

human being was reborn as a god and a king by undergoing a symbolic death, and was often given a new name.⁷ Thus we may appreciate the importance of the *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage) in Irish legends. The king was able to demonstrate that he was married to the goddess (or land), and this confirmed his right to the kingdom. There is, I think, little doubt that sacral kingship was customary among the Germanic peoples, just as it was for other races. But it has been difficult to find irrefutable evidence for the consecration of kings. In Ireland, however, the legends and historical sources give clear testimony.

The customs for consecrating the king as described by the Irish scholar Binchy were implicit in the so-called *banais rígi* (the wedding-feast of kingship), which represented the king's marriage to the personification of the female deity, who is called *Sovereignty* in the English language and legends, and *flaith* in Irish. She is in fact the goddess of the land or the district over which the king ruled. The word *flaith* is a pun, and has two distinct meanings: on the one hand 'ale' or 'mead', on the other 'power' or 'authority' (Dillon, 109 ff.).

The circumstances of this *hieros gamos* were as follows: the goddess (sovereignty and the land personified) offered a consecrated victim a drink and went to bed with him. Vestiges of this ceremony are found in Irish sources right into the fourteenth century, where it is said that Fedlimid O'Conchobhair married the region of Connacht (Dillon and Chadwick, 93).

With reference to the story of Gunnlǫð in *Hávamál*, it is interesting that O'Rahilly and Mac Cana consider both motifs, of the granting of the mead and of the embrace, to be the central focus of myths and stories about the earth-goddess. In Irish stories, varying emphasis is laid on the two motifs; sometimes one or the other is in the foreground, while in some only one of the motifs appears. The scholar Mac Cana, who has made an exhaustive study of these stories, points out that there is no reason to expect that all versions will preserve the same pattern in every small detail. He considers that the story is concerned with the *hieros gamos* if one or both elements are present in the correct context. He also points out that the word *banais* in *banais rígi* could indicate both elements (in Old Irish, the word is rendered *banfheiss*, and the word *fess* (*feis*) can mean both 'to sleep' and 'to sit feasting') (Mac Cana, 86).

The episode in *Hávamál* preserves both of these central motifs with exceptional clarity, and the statement that Gunnlǫð gave 'a drink of the precious mead' (drycc ins dýra miaðar) is foregrounded. The embrace is mentioned as if it were self-evident, or well-known to the audience. But Óðinn himself is very eloquent about the effect of the goddess's 'laying an arm over him':

Ífi er mér á, at ec væra enn kominn
 iǥtna ǥrðom ór,
 ef ec Gunnlaðar né nytac, innar góðo kono,
 þeirar er lǥgðomc arm yfir. (*Háv.* 108)

(I am in doubt as to whether I would have come back from the courts of the

giants, if I had not made use of Gunnlǫð, that good woman, who laid her arm over me.)

Is it not reasonable to interpret this as meaning that Óðinn is thanking Gunnlǫð for her help with the robbery and escape? In religious contexts, such ‘holy embraces’ were associated with magical power; might not Óðinn be alluding to his magical power, which has been magnified by his having enjoyed the sexual favours of the goddess?

V

The Irish drink was both red in colour and intoxicating. That is so strong a characteristic of the drink that even in the stories where the king is given the holy drink from a spring its intoxicating effect is mentioned (O’Rahilly 1946b, 14 ff.; Rees and Rees, 75).

One of the most celebrated goddesses in this group of stories is Medb Lethderg, who derives her name from the mead and its role in the consecration ceremony (Doht, 60).⁸ In the legendary tradition, she is said to be the queen of Leinster, but there is no doubt that originally she was a goddess who granted the king authority to govern. Legend has it that Medb’s power over the men of Ireland was strong because “she permitted no king to reign in Tara unless he were wedded to herself,” and it is said that she was married to nine kings of Ireland in a row. The legend says that one of them, Cormac, did not become king over Ireland until Medb had slept with him (O’Rahilly 1946b, 15; Rees and Rees, 75).

The influence of the mead is implicit in the goddess’s name, since *Medb* means ‘the intoxicating one,’ or ‘the one who makes a man drunk’. *Medb* is from the same root as the Welsh *meddw*, which means ‘drunk’ and is related to the English word *mead* (Rees and Rees, 75) as well as the Old Icelandic word *miǫður* (mead).

Nothing is said about the effect of the precious mead on Óðinn in *Hávamál* sts. 104–110, but something of it comes across in sts. 13 and 14, where he alludes to the drink he has at Gunnlǫð’s place. It is rather farfetched to maintain that he is referring to any drink other than the ‘precious mead’ in these stanzas. He describes its intoxicating effect as follows:

Óminnis hegri heitir sá er yfir þlōrom þrumir;
hann stelr geði guma;
þess fugls fiǫðrom ec fiǫtraðr varc
í garði Gunnlaðar.
Qr ec varð, varð ofrǫlvi
at ins fróða Fialars (sts. 13–14).

(The heron of forgetfulness hovers over the ale-drinking; he steals men’s wits; with the feathers of this bird I was fettered in the court of Gunnlǫð. Drunk I was, I was more than drunk at wise Fjalar’s.)

The drink given to the Irish king was not just intoxicating, it was also red in

colour, and great emphasis is laid on this fact. The drink is literally named after its colour, since *derg flaith* means ‘the red ale’. In the story about Conn told above, Sovereignty asks who should receive ‘the red ale’. The last name of the goddess Medb, *Lethderg*, means ‘half-red’ or ‘red on one side’ (Rees and Rees, 75). Thus the colour of the mead is implicit in her name, too.

Colour is also mentioned at the beginning of st. 107 of *Hávamál*: “Vel keyptz litir / hefi ec vel notið, / fás er fróðom vant” (The cheaply bought *litir* I made good use of, the wise lack for little). Scholars have found it difficult to explain the word *litir* in this context, and Evans gives a splendid list of all the theories which have been put forward over the years. None of them seems to be entirely satisfactory, however, and Evans says that it is likely that the line is so corrupt that it is not possible to restore it (121). But the Irish stories lay so much emphasis on the colour of the drink given to the king that it does not seem altogether absurd to suggest that the same considerations are at work here, and that Óðinn is using the word *litir* to describe the mead itself, with the second *helmingr* referring to the vat from which it was poured [Óðrerir]. The drink might then be seen in its proper context when sts. 140–41 (part of the subsection called *Rúnatal*) are taken into account: there, drinking the precious mead is associated with obtaining wisdom, and almost the same words (“fróðr vera” [be wise]) are used. We might recall that in the Irish saga tradition the otherworldly drink is associated with wisdom (O’Rahilly 1946a, 326–7).

It might be that in st.141, Óðinn is explaining for us exactly what we need to know about the importance of the *hieros gamos*, although only one key detail, the ancient drink, is mentioned in the previous stanza: “þá nam ec frœvaz / oc fróðr vera” (Then I began to quicken and be wise, st. 141). In sts. 107 and 108, Óðinn might be confirming his right to the realm, as kings had to do; he has been through both parts of the ceremony properly, and has grown in wisdom and been “aukinn iarðar megni” (empowered with the strength of earth). In other words, he has slept with the goddess.⁹

In the second *helmingr* of st. 107, we learn how he used his knowledge: “þvíat Óðrerir / er nú upp kominn / á alda vés iarðar” (for Óðrerir has now come up to the rim of the shrine of men? or to Earth’s shrine of Aldi? [see below]).

And now things become complicated. The last line *á alda vés iarðar* has proved difficult to explain and there have been many theories as to what it means. Some scholars have resorted to emending the text, in order to glean some meaning from it, and have substituted *iaðar* (rim) for *iarðar*. Others have claimed these words refer to *Ásgarðr* or *Miðgarðr*. Evans emends to *jaðar*, but Gísli Sigurðsson remains faithful to the manuscript in his edition, and allows *jarðar* to stand. My reason for attempting to explicate this line is first and foremost because there does not as yet appear to be a satisfactory explication. Secondly, none of my assumptions about the narrative content of *Hávamál* will be negated if my explication of this line proves to be absurd. Thirdly, my attempt to explicate the line has the advantage that it does not

necessitate emending the text.

Because I view sts. 104–110 in the light of religious practices, I think it is unwise to look for an explanation in mythology. Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr are mythological locales, and I think that we have an obligation to interpret all things with what Snorri Sturluson calls “jarðlegr skilningr” (earthly wisdom, ed. Faulkes 1982, 4; tr. 2). The religious ceremony which is described in st. 107, the holy consecration of the king and the goddess of the land or the earth, must be taking place in the goddess’s own shrine, *vé Jarðar* (Earth’s shrine). But what was that shrine like?

In the ancient religion of the Irish, the world to which men went after death was said to be in the hills, i.e. in the ancient grave mounds (*síd*, plural *síde*), or somewhere out at sea. Sometimes the entrance to the other-world was a cave-mouth (Dillon and Chadwick, 150). The deities honoured by this religion are named after the goddess Dana, and are called *Tuatha de Danann* (Dana’s folk or race). The story goes that Dana’s folk agreed to live underground after having been driven from power in Ireland. They are the Irish equivalent of the Icelandic *huldufolk* (hidden people). Ancient grave mounds still stand, bearing witness to the religion which was associated with these ‘hidden people’. These mounds are reminiscent of the *jættestuer* in Scandinavia, where one walks or crawls into a narrow passage which opens into a vaulted stone chamber.

Belief in these goddesses is connected with the earth in the most literal terms. It is not unlikely that the religion of the ancient Scandinavians was associated with hills, or that religious ceremonies derived from belief in the earth and in re-birth took place in specially prepared hills or caves. Innumerable traditions associated with such places survive in the *fornaldarsögur* and in folklore. It is clearly not sensible to lay too much emphasis on these traditions, but there is a weight of evidence to suggest that such ceremonies continued into the saga age. Men entered into foster brotherhood with one another by carving up the earth and going under an arch of raised turf where they drew their own blood and mixed it together with the soil (*Gísla saga* ch. 6, ed. Þórolfsson and Jónsson, 22–23). This is obviously a re-birth ritual where belief in the earth as mother is implicit in the actual form of the ceremony. When men entered into foster brotherhood, the earth was not merely a symbol of re-birth; it was also the ceremony’s frame, the shrine itself, the actual womb of a mother.

In this connection, we recall *Landnámabók*’s account of Þórðr *gellir*, which appears to indicate some kind of consecration ceremony: “Var (þar) þá gǫr hǫrg, er blót tóku til; trúðu þeir því, at þeir dæi í hólana, ok þar var þórðr gellir leiddr í, áðr hann tók mannvirðing.” (ed. Benediktsson, 140) (Then a shrine was made there, where sacrifices were performed; they believed that people died and went into the mound and Þórðr *gellir* was taken into it, before he assumed his reputation.)

In fact, it might be said that religious rituals which took place in such an

earthly location actually happened *inside* the earth, under its surface. Nothing would be more natural than to say that whoever came *out* from there with a vat (Óðrerir) had come up, or to the surface.

We know that ancient religious sites were often located on islands. *Njarðar vé* (Njǫrðr's shrine) is on the island of Njardarlag, off the west coast of Norway, and has been definitely identified as a heathen religious site (Olsen). Óðrerir came up "á alda vés iarðar" (*Háv.* 107:8). *Alda* could be the accusative of the noun *alði*, and it seems reasonable to give this word some consideration before resorting to textual emendation. Off the west coast of Norway lies the island of Alden, which was called Aldi in ancient times and is mentioned in *Egils saga* and elsewhere (ed. Sveinsson, 164). Next to it lies another island called Araldi. Sophus Bugge suggested that *alði* means 'high island,' or an island which rises high up out of the sea. On Aldi is a mountain which sailors traditionally refer to as 'the Norwegian horse'. As the name suggests, Araldi is named for the eagle [ON *ari*, 'eagle'], and there is a peak some 200 metres high on the island. I have not been able to determine whether Aldi was in any way associated with ancient religious ceremonies; I am wary of pinning *Hávamál's* *iarðar vé* down to this particular island,¹⁰ but it may be that the word *alði* was used generally to refer to islands with particular topographical features. *Iarðar vés alði* would then be the island or holm where such a holy place is. When it is said that Óðrerir came up "á alda vés iarðar," it could mean that Óðrerir came up from the holy kingdom, or from the underworld up to the surface of the island (*alði*) where Earth's shrine (*Iarðar vé*) was.

VI

In *Hávamál*, the consecration ends in tragedy. The newly consecrated king steals the sacred treasure. 'The next day' (Ins hindra dags, 109:1), the frost-giants come to *Háva hqll* to ask for news. If people cling to the belief that *Háva hqll* is in fact Ásgarðr and that Hávi (the High One) here is actually Óðinn himself, the sequence of events becomes meaningless.¹¹ But in the light of the religious customs that I have described, Hávi cannot be anyone other than the being who in the strength of his religious knowledge and his power over occult forces has directed the entire course of events and has led the young king-elect [Óðinn] into the secret world. The king must both show deference to this world and take control of it. The only teacher worthy of the honorific *Hávi* in this context is the king of the other-world or the underworld, the equivalent of the Irish Lug. His deputy on earth in holy ceremonies is the wise man (frœðimaðr), as Snorri calls him in his *Edda*.¹² The Norse mead is thus associated with three groups of people: kings, poets and wise men. Similarly, its Indian equivalent, the *soma*, was the traditional drink of kings, poets and Brahmin, as we shall see later on. Snorri calls the mead *Suttungamjǫð*, 'the mead of Suttungr'. In *Skirnismál* st. 34, the giants are called Suttungr's sons (synir suttunga). It is therefore not unlikely that

suttungr is not a proper noun, but an epithet referring to a job of work (like *konungr*, “king”), and that the person it refers to here was also known as Fjalarr, since he is called by that name in *Hav. st.* 14.

The king’s consecration ceremony comprised other elements in addition to the *hieros gamos*, although the wedding was the seal, the confirmation and the consecration itself. This was the custom among other ancient peoples, the Irish and Eastern nations. Otto Höfler (1959) links Óðinn’s self-sacrifice with the consecration of the king to holy kingship, and Jere Fleck produces evidence for the fact that knowledge of religious lore was associated with the election of kings in ancient times. *Loddfáfnismál*, *Rúnatal* and *Ljóðatal* (subsections of *Hávamál*) are all concerned with powerful knowledge and lore, and the name *Loddfáfnir* might indicate that the consecration ritual is in some way be connected with the cult of the Earth (the earth-serpent?). In a religious connection, self-sacrifice is often symbolic of death, the precursor of re-birth in the Gunnlǫð ceremony. These four elements are brought together in *Hávamál*. It is likely that these four elements might be usefully examined as a unified whole representing all the aspects of the royal election ceremony as practised among the Germanic peoples.

VII

One might ask whether the Gunnlǫð story in *Hávamál* is rooted in Norse culture or whether it might be instead a Norse imitation or adaptation of an Irish original. There is no doubt in my mind that it is part of the Norse tradition. What we know of the religious outlook and *Weltanschauung* of the ancient Germanic peoples suggests that such religious customs as those described in the poem found a place there. And it would be remarkable if, alone among the Indo-European peoples, the Germanic tribes had escaped the power of the great goddess. It is, however, beyond the scope of this article for me to do any more than to touch upon a few of the more salient points.

Earlier, I mentioned the symbolic re-birth which was part of the king’s consecration. This is an appropriate place for me to say a little about the belief which lay behind it. It implies more than just the cycle of the seasons. Behind it lies a belief in the “Eternal Return,” as Eliade calls it: a belief in the perpetual cycle, at the heart of which is the immortal soul and the notion of resurrection or reincarnation into the next life (Eliade 1974, 1975). Roman historians say that Celtic druids taught that the soul did not die, but lived on “in alio orbe” (in another sphere); men were reincarnated into the next life (Dillon and Chadwick, 152–3). Numerous passages in the Eddic poems and other texts bear witness to the same kind of belief among the ancient Germanic peoples. The epilogue to *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* says, “Þat var trúa í fornescio, að menn væri endrbornir, enn þat er nú kǫlluð kerlingarvilla” (There was a belief in the old religion, which we now reckon an old wives’ tale, that people could be reincarnated). In this context, the word *kerlingavilla* must be associated with belief in the goddess. One may also be

reminded of expressions like *ódáinsakr* (the field of those who do not die) or *land lifanda manna* (the land of the living), which contain the same idea of immortality.

In *The Celtic Realms*, Dillon and Chadwick state:

The spiritual role assigned to women in this cult of rebirth is a lofty one. In this phase of Irish mythology the woman, not the man, is the spiritual vehicle who conveys the soul of the dead to rebirth in a later generation. (153)

There is no disputing the fact that the Norse people believed in the goddess. History, literature and archeological finds give a clear testimony that this was the case (Glob 1974, 1977; Brandsted; Tacitus, ch. 40; de Vries 1941, 2: 302–14).¹³

The Irish scholar O’Rahilly maintains that the Irish goddesses were not just goddesses of the land but were also associated with the sun, rivers and lakes. He deduced this from their names, among other things. The country itself, Eire, derives its name from the goddess who is called Flaith Eirenné (‘the sovereignty of Ireland’) in the sagas. One particular Irish goddess is called Grian, and O’Rahilly considers her to have been a sun-goddess, for the simple reason that her name means ‘Sun’. The name of the Irish goddess Ainne, he says, means ‘traveller of the heavens’, and is associated with wheels or golden discs (O’Rahilly 1946b; 1946a, 286). Mór of Munster is believed to have been a goddess, since it is said that the kings of Ireland sought her or desired her; people in Munster still say when the sun shines that Mór is sitting in her high-seat (Mac Cana, 81, 91 ff.; Rees and Rees, 136).

According to the sources, the high-seat was the inviolable place of the goddess in the ancient royal consecration ceremonies. In the story of Conn, Sovereignty is seated on a crystal throne, and similar examples may be found in the East. In Indian collections of illustrations particularly associated with kingship, we find representations of Lakshmi which show her sitting among lotus flowers or on a high-backed or backless high-seat (De, 3:257). In consecration ceremonies of both ancient Egypt and the East, the throne itself is named after a goddess: in Egypt it was called Isis. In Sumerian texts describing the coronation in the temple of Ishtar, the symbols of power (the branch and the crown) are referred to as goddesses (‘the goddess of the branch of power’ and ‘the goddess of the crown’). These symbols remain on the high-seat until the king takes them. Afterwards it is said that “she” has given him a new name (Frankfort, 245–56).

In Norse mythology, the sun and brightness are associated with feminine beings, particularly giants’ daughters and valkyries, as well as with the Vanir goddess Freyja. One of the Ásynjur is called Sól (Sun). In the Eddic poems, Hliðskjálf is neither located in Valhøll nor is it exclusively Óðinn’s seat. The Eddic poems suggest that, besides Óðinn, several other gods had a right to this throne: Freyr is mentioned in *Skírnismál*, and *Grimnismál* says that Frigg (the highest of the Ásynjur) sits there and sees all the worlds, just as Óðinn does.

Although no definite stories about the sun-goddess are preserved in Norse mythology, traces of her are evident in folk-tales and fairy-tales. The myth of the sun swallowed by the wolf, as in *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 47 (“Eina dóttur / berr Álfþrúðull, / áðr hana Fenrir fari” [Elf-disc will bear a daughter, before Fenrir assails her]), lives on among us in the story of Little Red Riding Hood, to cite one example.¹⁴ Considered alongside what has been said about Gunnlǫð and the golden chair above, I think that it will hardly be gainsaid that the golden chair is in fact Gunnlǫð’s throne.

Does Gunnlǫð’s name suggest that she was a goddess and belonged to this literary tradition? At first glance, it might appear that *(f)laith* and *-lǫð* were related words, but it has not been easy to find evidence to support this. On the one hand, there is the fact that *flaith* is interpreted as *lgð* in the name of the Irish Queen Cormflaith (meaning ‘pure power’), who is called Kormlǫð in *Njáls saga*.¹⁵ The description of Kormlǫð is almost identical with the personifications of these goddesses when the saga tradition has euhemerized them and placed them in a definite historical context. It is most likely that the translator perceived the relationship between these two female characters.

In Old Norse, *lǫð* meant ‘hospitality’, ‘a good reception’ (Böðvarsson, s.v.) or ‘an invitation’ (Egilsson, s.v. “indbydelse”). The appropriateness of this as the final element in her name will not be denied when the splendid welcome Óðinn received at Gunnlǫð’s place is kept in mind. Many scholars believe that Gunnlǫð’s name indicates that she was a valkyrie or a goddess. But the precise origin of the valkyries is unknown.

“Sovereignty,” as was mentioned earlier, has many meanings: she is at once a bride, the one who serves the heady drink and the drink itself (Rees and Rees, 76). Mac Cana believes that the name “Sovereignty” represents a late allegorical reading, and that the woman with the drink was initially the personification of the holy mother-goddess, Eriu. O’Rahilly advances the same theory (1946b, 14). Originally, the great mother-goddess was extremely versatile. It was her function to guard the well-being of the land and the people, although she would entrust her executive power on earth to the king. In origin, she is the great goddess of eastern mythology who rules over life, death and the fates of men; she is Inanna, the powerful goddess of light, life and war; she is Ishtar and Astarte; she is the Indian goddess Lakshmi. It was only one of her roles to sanctify the man with her embraces, and it is therefore pointless to expect her to bear a name indicating only fertility worship. The Irish Sovereignty sometimes has the same name as the country or district; sometimes, she takes her name from the mead or from her role in the consecration ceremony.

Similarly, the valkyries had several functions, and it is likely that their symbolism, characteristics and behaviour are inherited from the goddess of the king and the land, Gunnlǫð. The pattern is the same, although emphases vary. Valkyries were supernatural beings who accompanied the king and heroes as wives or lovers. It is clear from the poem *Darraðarljóð* in *Njáls*

saga that valkyries were believed to govern fate, which in the ancient religion was one of the roles of the great mother-goddess. There are also cases where valkyries, like the Irish goddesses, took their name from the land or the people; it is believed that Sváva in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* is associated either with Svávaland or its inhabitants (Höfler 1952, 24).¹⁶

The women who were the spiritual channels for souls between the worlds in Norse mythology were either giantesses or valkyries. They controlled the mead which granted eternal life; the valkyries themselves were reincarnated. If we follow the clues provided by the mead, it becomes clear that it is not Gunnlǫð alone who gives an invitation to a *hieros gamos*. The giant's daughter Gerðr in *Skírnismál* and Sigrdrífa (the valkyrie Brynhild) both serve mead. In *Skírnismál*, 'holy embraces' are readily apparent, but in *Sigrdrífumál*, as we shall see later, they are implicit in the valkyrie's having been enchanted. It is tempting to speak of Menglǫð in *Fjölsvinnsmál* in this connection. The name *Menglǫð* might be compounded from the words *menga* ('to mix'; Old English *mengan*) and *lǫð*. The royal drink would thus be implicit in her name. Menglǫð's name has usually been taken to mean 'the one who is pleased with her necklace' [i.e. *men-glöð*]. That she may have been, although there is no mention of her having had a necklace. On the other hand, both the patterns of mythology and the symbolism of *Ejqlsvinnsmál* are analogous to other stories in this group.¹⁷

The valkyries' function is to serve the beer in Valhǫll, as it says in both *Grimnismál* and *Snorra Edda*. Here, we are obviously talking about the vestiges of the drink of eternal life and Gunnlǫð's role in the royal consecration. Might we not expect to find the explanation for the eternal resurrection of the chosen warriors here? What drink, we might ask, was better fitted to reinvigorate fallen heroes than the one over which these divine beings had power? On the other hand, it is a fact that the name of the Germanic goddess of the king appears to be associated with battle more often than is the case among her Irish sisters, and Germanic heroes seem to ask her for a sword more often than for a draught of the mead of eternal life. It would be hasty to dismiss her or to decide for these reasons that she and the valkyries were merely goddesses of war.

Norse kings did not only make sacrifices for prosperity and peace, but also for victory (*Heimskringla*, ed. Aðalbjarnarson, 20). It is therefore clear that one of the functions of divine beings was to support the king in warfare.¹⁸ *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* says that Sváva protected Helgi in battle, and it is not unlikely that the king's goddess (the valkyrie) sometimes took her name from this role. It may be that Germanic kings believed that it was more important for governance to have a sword and victory in battle than a draught of the mead of eternal life. This much is certain: the goddess's support meant health and good fortune for the king, but her abandonment meant defeat and certain death.

Two further aspects connect the valkyries with the goddess tradition: the

wall of flame, which I will come to later, and their enchanted state.

VIII

A comparison of Celtic and Indian legends about the goddesses of the land demonstrates that the drink of fate is an essential motif in stories of this kind. In the Irish stories, Sovereignty sometimes takes the form of a very old and ugly hag who refuses to give the king's son or the hero permission to sip the mead unless he first kisses her or sleeps with her. If he complies, she turns into an extraordinarily beautiful maiden.

One such story is the tale of Niall and the Nine Hostages. The story says that once, when they were young, Niall and his four brothers went out hunting in the forest. They planned to cook their victim, and sent Fergus off to look for drinking water. He came to a certain brook, which was being guarded by an ugly crone with black skin. The crone refused to give Fergus water unless he kissed her. The boy refused to do so and came back without water. Each of his three brothers later went on the same errand. One of them condescended to touch her lightly with his lips. In return, she promised him that he would just barely be touched by kingship, by which she meant that two of his descendants would be kings. Then it was Niall's turn. When the same condition was put to him, he clasped the crone to himself and kissed her. In his arms, she turned into the most beautiful woman in the world. "Who are you?" the boy asked. And she answered, "King of Tara, I am Sovereignty... and your seed will rule over every clan." Then she sent him back to his brothers and forbade him to give them water until they had sworn an oath of loyalty to him (Rees and Rees, 73 ff.).

The tale of Lugaid and his brothers is similar. Daire had five sons who were all called Lugaid, and it had been prophesied that one of them would become king over Ireland. A druid told Daire that whichever of them tracked down a hind with golden fur would become king. Lugaid Laigde cornered the hind and killed it. Then there was a great blizzard and one of the brothers went off to look for shelter. He came to a house where there was a blazing fire and an abundance of food and ale, where the dishes were made of silver and the bed of white bronze, and where there was also a repellent hag. She offered the boy lodgings on the condition that he sleep with her that night. When he refused to do so, she told him that he had thereby refused "sovranty" and royal honour. One after another, each of the brothers except Lugaid Laigde then went to the house and asked the hag for shelter, but none of them was invited to stay. In the end, Lugaid Laigde went into her chamber after sharing food and drink with her. When she lay down in bed, he did what she asked, and to his astonishment he saw that her face was shining like a rising sun in May and that she smelt like a fragrant garden. Lugaid took her in his arms, and she told him: "This is a good journey you've made, because I am Sovereignty, and you will get sovereignty over Ireland."¹⁹

The enchanted Sovereignty motif is both commonplace and widely known

in medieval lore, and examples are also found in Icelandic literature, both ancient and modern.²⁰ Some of the valkyries, too, are enchanted and lie in an enchanted sleep. The Germanic hero does not waken them with a kiss but rather by cutting them out of their skintight coat of mail. Two motifs from this type of story are found in *Sigrdrífumál*, as was mentioned earlier: enchantment and the drinking of mead.

Mythographers stress that these stones about enchantment should not be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that the goddess is an allegorical figure. They remind us that she is the personification of the land. The magical power of the kiss which breaks the spell in stories and folktales of this kind is in essence the divine power which resides in sacred intercourse, in the release of the earth's fertility from its fetters, the invigoration of the barren land and the healing of disease. The kiss she craves is a test for the hero and he is not worthy of kingship unless he passes it. A principal feature of all these stories about Sovereignty is that she is the one who directs the course of events and decides whether the king is worthy. She takes the initiative and puts him to the test.

What we are dealing with here is the power the divine being has over the human, who must submit to the conditions imposed by the higher power without hesitation. If, on the other hand, the king were in some way unfit to rule, the fertility of the land and of every creature would suffer for it. The land would become barren and the goddess's condition would reflect that of the land, since according to religious thought, they are one and the same. In medieval stories, such as in the Grail legends, it is not merely the land that is barren; the woman (earth-goddess) who impels the knights onwards and controls the entire plot is similarly afflicted, usually becoming bald or decrepit (Loomis, 296–300; Coomeraswamy 1945, 393 ff.).

The woman has the characteristics of a powerful personage, even when she has become a historical figure in the annals, sagas and tales. But in these genres, the original religious and symbolic outlook and the characteristics of the goddess, as protector of the land and its people against the worldly king, are considered faults in a human woman. When she appears as a queen in the Irish saga tradition, she is independent and bad-tempered, she is married several times over, she is not submissive, and she is vindictive if crossed. When this saga tradition is borne in mind, some of the most formidable women in the Icelandic sagas may be seen to have inherited to a suspicious degree the characteristics of the goddess of sacral kingship. Gunnhildr, the mother of kings, is easily recognisable and also a queen; Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir (in *Laxdæla saga*) may also be mentioned in this connection; and in *Njáls saga* there are two of them (an elder one and a younger one [Hallgerðr and Bergþóra]) obliged to incite thralls instead of heroes. Had Gunnarr understood early enough that his life depended on a divine lock of his wife's hair, he would hardly have given her that slap on the cheek. And it makes matters worse that a king (chieftain) who allows his household to go without food has

essentially relinquished his right to the kingdom, or ‘the fair slopes’ (of Iceland; *Njáls saga*, ch. 75).

IX

I do not have the leisure here to enumerate the examples of *hieros gamos* associated with the consecration of kings from India or the East in general, or to explore their relationship with the customs of the Irish. However, much has been written about these matters by other scholars who have been studying for decades the common origin of the ancient royal election ceremonies. I will pay some attention to Indian mythology, and hopefully it will then become clear that Snorri’s account of the theft of the mead adheres so closely to traditional story patterns that his mention of the three nights (during which Óðinn sleeps with Gunnlóð and is granted three draughts of the mead) stands out as a problematic interpolation, a dull echo of some religious custom which may have fallen into obscurity even though both story types clearly have their origins in the same mythological context.

In the ancient Indian myths, the drink was called *soma*. The Sanskrit name for it was *madbu*, a word cognate with *mjǫðr* and *mead* (de Vries 1957, 1:426). *Soma* was the drink of kings, Brahmin and poets. It made men immortal, it inspired poets with the gift of poetic spirit and it endowed the Indians’ warrior-king and war-god with superhuman courage. *Soma* increased the gods’ divine power; it was the gods’ language. It was able to perform all of these functions simultaneously because in essence it was the drink of eternal life and was poured out in ancient ceremonies and holy customs which represented re-birth. “We have drunk *soma*. We have become immortal. We have reached the light. We have found the gods,” as it says in the *Rig-Veda* (O’Flaherty).

The herb which was used to make the drink, and which gave it its intoxicating power, was also called *soma*. According to the *Rig-Veda*, it grew on Mujavat mountain. It had to be gathered by moonlight; then it was washed in water and milk. The herbs were crushed between two large stones and the liquid strained through a sieve into a cauldron before being mixed with water, milk and barley.

Soma was also the name of the god in whose honour the ancient *soma* ritual was performed. During the ceremony, the drink was brought to him as an offering. He was thus the god who was sacrificed to himself. The *soma* ritual took place over a three-day period and three different vessels were used. In the course of time, the god Soma became identified with the moon-god himself and ten white horses were said to drag him in a wagon across the dome of the sky.

‘Holy embraces’ were part of the *soma* ritual. In the ceremony, Soma was simultaneously the moon, the sacred herb and the juice or drink. His bride was Surya, the sun’s daughter. Surya’s maidservants were two poetic metres, her bridal gown was decorated with songs, her crown and hair adornments were

rhythm and metres, and heaven and earth were her dowry when she went to join her bridegroom. It is said that her bridegroom was continually new with every birth (the New Moon) and that he allotted the gods their fates; this must refer to their life-spans or to time in general. I understand that this divine wedding is still, to some extent, the model for Indian weddings (O'Flaherty, 10.85, 267).

In the *Rig-Veda*, *soma* is particularly associated with Indra, the great king and warrior. A legend survives concerning Indra's wedding to his daughter Apala. The scholar Coomeraswamy believes that this saga is part of the group of enchantment stories, analogous with the Irish stories, in which 'holy embraces' release all things from their fetters (Coomeraswamy, 391–404; O'Flaherty, 8.91). In these stories, it is Apala who has the upper hand in the relationship. She thinks to herself: "What would it be like to marry Indra? Wouldn't he increase my economic status, work for me, enrich me?" She addresses him as "You there, little hero." She brings him *soma* which she has prepared specially by chewing it, and asks him to impregnate three things: her father's head, his field and the place below her belly. Then Indra drinks the *soma* from her lips. There follows a remarkable purification ritual, and although there is no need to describe it in detail here, Coomeraswamy concludes that Apala, the daughter of the sun, appears in the likeness of a serpent and that the ritual itself represents shape-changing. Inevitably, everything blooms anew: the baldness on her father's head, the barren and unfruitful field, and the complexion of the goddess or snake shines bright as the sun.

In this myth, Indra receives the *soma* from Apala, the daughter of the sun, but he is also said to obtain it in other ways. According to the *Rig-Veda*, the gods acquired *soma* from an eagle who flew down from heaven and gave it to Indra. This account is similar to *Snorra Edda's* story about the eagle which flew into Ásgarðr with the mead of poetry; scholars agree it can hardly be by chance. Both stories must derive from the Indo-European narrative tradition (O'Flaherty, 4.26–27).²¹

There is only one mention of Indra having taken the form of an eagle and fetched the mead, but Indian mythology does not present this as one of his characteristics (Doht, 80). The eagle is called Garuda (*soma*-thief); Coomeraswamy investigates the story further and it becomes clear that it was the power of the voice and poetic metre (*gayatri*, fem.) which took the form of the eagle and fetched the *soma* from heaven. This power is in fact the goddess Vac, the goddess of the voice, who gives sages, prophets and poets the gift of the spirit (Coomeraswamy 1947, 466).²² In fact, she is the abstract force of creation (called Garuda when she appears as an eagle; she is Gayatri when she reveals herself in the most splendid poetic metre). She is incarnated as a human in her association with Prjapati, and together they create the whole world and all living things. It is therefore likely that it is not entirely coincidental that the Norse god associated with poetry should be the same one

who brings mead to the gods.

In a more remarkable and comprehensive article, Coomeraswamy draws attention to the fact that the Symplegades motif appeared in this group of Indian myths as frequently as in myths belonging to other peoples (Coomeraswamy 1947, 463–88; Cook, 975–1015). The Symplegades are familiar from Greek mythology and were, as it is well known, cliffs which clashed together. The doves who fetched the ambrosia from Seifa in the Other World had to fly between these cliffs on their journey, and one of them always lost its life there. The Symplegades were the perilous entrance to the world of the undead, the obstacle that the hero had to pass if he wished to find treasure in the other world. The Greek word has become a kind of synonym for the phenomenon, but the obstacle may of course exist in various forms.

In heaven, the *soma* was well-protected. The *Mahabharata* explains that the eagle had to slip through a wheel of flame to reach the *soma*:

There before the Soma Garuda beheld a razor-edged wheel of steel, covered with sharp blades, and continually revolving, as terribly bright as the sun, an engine of unspeakably dreadful aspect, fitly devised by the Gods for the cutting to pieces of Soma-thieves; the Skyfarer, seeing an opening therein, hovered, and, making a cast of his body suddenly darted through between the spokes ...[and] flew off with the Water of Life (Coomeraswamy 1947, 481).

In another version of the story, told in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, the eagle has to fly between two golden, razor-sharp reeds, which clash together in the blink of an eye (Coomeraswamy 1947, 466; Fowler, 215).

Snorra Edda says, “Flytr Suttungr mjǫðinn heim og hirðir þar sem heitir Hnitbjörg, setr þar til gæzlu dóttur sína Gunnlǫðu” (ed. Faulkes 1998, 1:3): “Suttung took the mead home with him and put it for safe keeping in a place called Hnitbjorg, setting his daughter Gunnlod in charge of it”; tr. Faulkes, 62). The mead is also called *Hnitbjargarlǫgr* in the Icelandic sagas. *Hnit* means ‘collision’, and the *Hnitbjörg* are therefore the ‘collision-cliffs’, the cliffs which crash together. There can be no doubt that Snorri’s account preserves the motif of the Symplegades, the perilous entrance to the other-world, the cliffs which clash together and require superhuman skills if the hero is to pass through them and get the treasure without being crushed.²³ It is in this that the hero’s heroism resides. The *Hnitbjörg* in fact represent the space, as fine as a hair, that separates life and death. The hero must rush in and back out again so fast that, as Coomeraswamy puts it, there is no point in even trying for someone who cannot decide whether he is “to be or not to be.” It is a common feature of stories of this kind that the hero escapes so narrowly that he loses something in the process. According to the laws of myth, a hero who delays for three days and nights is doomed.

In both the *Rig-Veda* and the *Satapatha Brahmana*, we are told that Garuda did not come through this perilous journey safe and sound. There was a guardian looking after the *soma*, and he quickly shot an arrow after the eagle so that the bird lost one of its tail-feathers (O’Flaherty, 4.27, 4; ed. Eggeling,

1,7,1,I). The guardian of the *soma* is said to have been a snake. The story of Garuda's escape displays noteworthy parallels with Snorri's account in which Suttungr, guardian of the mead, pursues the eagle with the result that it loses part of its booty.

In one Indian story, *soma* is associated with the giants. Somaprabha (the actual shining or brightness of *soma*), the daughter of Asura Maya (the giant who is the gods' smith), has assumed the likeness of a human woman and entertains her friend by showing him some of her father's remarkable work. She explains to his father that this handiwork is in fact associated with the mechanism of heaven and earth. She says that she has received all of this from her father, and adds: "But he alone, and no-one else, understands the wheel which guards the water of life" (Coomeraswamy 1947, 482–4). Coomeraswamy writes: "That wheel as bright as the sun which was the entrance to the world of eternal life beyond the sun is, of course, the sun itself." In other texts, the sun-wheel, which is the equivalent of the Sympeglades or *Hnithjgrg*, is described as a glowing wheel (*Maitri Upanishad*, tr. Hume, VI, 24; Coomeraswamy 1947, 484). And what is the *vafurlogi*, the wheel of fire which encircles the valkyries and giants' daughters, Gerðr and Menglǫð, if not a glowing wheel of fire?²⁴ The hero who succeeded in riding through the *vafurlogi* would acquire the otherworldly treasure of a bride and a drink or a supernatural sword as well as total sovereignty.

The *Upanishad Brabmana* says that nobody is able to pass through the middle of the sun except by truth (ed. Bodewitz, I.3, 5, 6; Coomeraswamy 1947, 484). On the far side of the sun lies immortality, the land of eternal life, the cup of life. Is it hard to imagine that the land beyond the sun is more beautiful than the sun itself, and that Gunnlǫð might be sitting there on a golden throne, offering immortality to a mortal man? And this after he has experienced the horror of death and been born again, just as the earth is in *Vǫluspá*.

X

In conclusion, I must say a few words about the theft. Coomeraswamy points out that the strong guard was not set with the intention of ensuring that the giants or the rightful owners should have the treasure to themselves. When the matter is considered more deeply, it was the owners of the mead themselves who supported the hero and often helped him on his way. The guard had to ensure that no unworthy person had access because no mortal could ever enter the kingdom of eternal life unless he deserved immortality. And it was the trials and impediments they had endured before reaching the kingdom which showed that they were worthy of the treasure. From the giants' point of view, the removal of treasures kept in the land of the immortal is theft, but from the gods' viewpoint, it is redemption, or freedom from enchantment. The Indian myth about the theft of the *soma* by an eagle speaks of the *soma* as a prisoner who has been freed. A certain justice is implicit in the texts, according to

Coomeraswamy, when they say that in the *soma* ritual the *soma* becomes what it in fact is: Soma is again sacrificed to himself. The god has come home again.

This disparity between the attitudes of the gods and giants is reflected in *Snorra Edda* and *Hávamál*. Although the description of Óðinn's struggle to acquire the mead does not make him out to be among the first rank of heroes, no attempt is made to conceal admiration for him in the account of his bringing the mead to the gods. But the attitude in *Hávamál*, st. 110, is altogether different: "Baugeið Óðinn / hygg ek at unnit hafi, / hvat skal hans trygðom trúa?" (I thought Odin had sworn a sacred ring-oath, how can his word be trusted?). The emphasis here is on betrayal rather than theft. The viewpoint is not that of the courageous hero who has performed some remarkable feat. An almost tragic note is struck here. Faith is shattered, and the integrity of the world of the gods is smashed. Stories about the theft of a sacred vessel from the underworld (from temples?) are well-known. The account of the theft in *Hávamál* may well be a branch of that tradition.

In short, the conclusions I have drawn from a comparison of stanzas 104–110 of *Hávamál* with *Snorra Edda*'s account of the relationship between Gunnlǫð and Óðinn are that these stanzas of *Hávamál* describe a religious ritual analogous with those which were customary in ancient Ireland, where they were associated with "Sovereignty." These ceremonies were associated with the *hieros gamos* whereby the king was consecrated to the land and the kingdom. Snorri's account, on the other hand, derives its principal motifs from mythological stories concerned with the theft of the nectar of eternal life. *Hávamál*'s 'precious mead' has to do with kings; it is a libation, the cup of life. Snorri associates the drink with poets and wise men. Snorri appears to have introduced into the myth traces of the legend about the *hieros gamos* between Gunnlǫð and Óðinn, but his sources concerning the consecration ceremony were very limited. For these reasons, his account has been much distorted, and the meaning that has been read into it and upheld (that Gunnlǫð allows herself to be seduced into giving Óðinn the mead) is a misinterpretation. Myths reflect the conceptions that men from former times had about their earthly existence; they are witnesses to their beliefs and religious customs. The kernel of a myth is never a banality.

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Notes

1. [Larrington 1992 includes this summary of Svava's novel (147, here slightly abridged): An Icelandic girl, Dís [her name means goddess], visiting the National Museum in Copenhagen, is drawn back into the Bronze Age through a gold cup and mirror on display. Dís becomes Gunnlöð, priestess of the old religion and con-secrator of kings. Óðinn must drink mead from the sacred cup and sleep with Gunnlöð in order to gain sovereignty over his kingdom. But Gunnlöð awakes to find Óðinn and the cup gone. Óðinn's theft represents the end of the worship of the goddess—mother, earth, giver of life and death—and the beginning of Óðinn's own cult of war, power-madness and new, unnatural technologies, the Iron Age. The cup must be recovered for women if the harmful effects of Óðinn's action are ever to be nullified. Dís is arrested for attempting to steal the cup from the museum. Her mother flies to Copenhagen and Dís unfolds the story to her. *Eds.*]

2. [Svava alludes to the final stanza of *Hávamál*, which claims that the poem is 'very useful to the sons of men,/ quite useless to the sons of giants' (tr. Larrington 1996). *Eds.*]

3. [Eddic citations from Neckel & Kuhn; translations adapted from Larrington 1996. *Eds.*]

4. [The people from the secret hills are the former gods of Ireland, the people of the Sidhe, who now live underground in fairy mounds. The Fomorians are a demonic tribe, original inhabitants of Ireland, who are enemies of both gods and humans. *Eds.*]

5. I have relied on Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's Icelandic translation in *Löng er för*, 106–7, although Einar Ólafur interprets the story in a different way from that presented here. [We have substituted Dillon's English translation. *Eds.*]

6. Loomis's source is O'Curry, 338.

7. See, for example, Weisweiler, Frankfurt, Hocart, von Friesen, Höfler, Eliade 1958 [and McTurk].

8. Doht draws attention to the fact that Gunnlöð's behaviour resembles Medb's, but she believes (as does Weisweiler, 115) that *Hávamál*'s 'precious mead' is the poetic mead, and does not pursue her researches into the Irish saga tradition concerning the land-goddesses to whom kings are consecrated.

9. Cf. *Hyndluljóð* st. 38 (*Vqluspá in skamma*): "Sá var aukinn / iarðar megni, / svalkǫldum sæ / oc sonardreyra." (He was empowered with the strength of earth, the cool waves of the sea, and sacrificial blood.)

10. A legend about Gunnlöð and her husband, Earl Álf the Old, traces their origins to Hjørðaland on the west coast of Norway (*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, ch. 10, ed. G. Jónsson, 106).

11. [That is, it does not make sense that the giants would ask Óðinn for advice about Óðinn's theft; see Evans, 123. *Eds.*]

12. [Fíalar and Galar ... mixed honey with the blood and it turned into the mead whoever drinks from which becomes a poet or scholar (ON *frúðimaðr*). Tr. Faulkes, 62.]

13. [See also Näsström. Not all scholars agree on this point; Davidson writes "the evidence we possess ... is vague and suggestive merely" (111). *Eds.*]

14. [We find no other references for this interpretation, but Martin (130–2) cites other instances of Scandinavian folk-lore involving the sun pursued by a wolf. *Eds.*]

15. Private communication from Jón Gunnarsson, *lektor* at Háskóli Islands (The University of Iceland).

16. Although my discussion of the valkyries is perforce neither wide-ranging nor exhaustive, nor even my principal focus in this article, I cannot pass up this opportunity of mentioning Ebenbauer's *Helgisage* und *Helgikult*, which came into my hands after my article

was in press. On the basis of his research into the Eddic Helgi poems, he comes to a similar conclusion about the valkyries' origins.

17. Sveinsson, 25 repudiates earlier scholars' theories about the influence of the Grail-legends on *Fjölsvinnsmál*, mostly on the grounds that there is no Grail in the poem. If my theory about the meaning of *Menglǫð* is correct, the equivalent of the Grail is there. *Fjölsvinnsmál* and the Grail-legends might well have drawn on the same story tradition, although it is not necessary to talk about actual influence. See "Grail, The Holy" in Hastings, 6: 385–89; also Weston, Loomis and Patch.

18. Evidence for the fact that the goddess is sacrificed to for victory is presented in *Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar*, where we are told that Earl Hákon Sigurðsson sacrificed to Þorgerðr Hólgabrúðr in order to ensure success in the fight against the Jómsvikings. See ed. F. Jónsson 1932, 61–62.

19. This saga is preserved in an Irish manuscript dating from the fourteenth century. My account of it is based on that in Krappe, 445. Krappe gives examples of ancient Persian analogues to the Sovereignty legends.

20. Sveinsson, 158 ff. gives several examples of the enchantment motif, both Icelandic and foreign.

21. According to Turville-Petre (291), it was Olrik (236 ff.) who first pointed out the similarity between the Indian eagle and the one in *Snorra Edda*.

22. The story of Gayatri as "soma-thief" is recounted in Eggeling, 3:6.2.8.9.

23. In 1925, Olrik put forward the theory that the *Hnithbjörg* were in fact the same phenomenon as the Symplegades, and several other scholars (Krappe and de Vries, for example) have adopted it. In both literature and mythology, Symplegades has been translated into Icelandic as *skellibjörg* or *skellidrangar*. It might have been nicer and more natural to have used the beautiful word *hnithjörg*.

24. On the *vafrilogi*, see Dronke, 263–66.

“*Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*: Cosmic History, Cosmic Geography”

Carolyne Larrington

Vafþrúðnismál and *Grímnismál*

Óðinn is the protagonist of both these poems, which follow *Hávamál* in the Codex Regius. In *Vafþrúðnismál* he visits the giant Vafþrúðnir in disguise to compete with him in a wisdom-contest in which the stake is the loser’s head. Once he has established (by posing some questions about mythological facts) that Óðinn is a worthy opponent, the giant accepts the challenge. Óðinn interrogates him at length until, perhaps having gained the information he sought (how he will die at *ragna rǫe*), he terminates the contest by putting a question to which only he and his son Baldr can know the answer. Vafþrúðnir must admit defeat. The poem is composed in *ljóðahátttr*, the meter of wisdom dialogues, and is often considered to be among the older poems in the Edda.

Grímnismál is, in contrast to *Vafþrúðnismál*, a wisdom monologue rather than a dialogue. A long prose framework tells how Óðinn and Frigg quarrel over the merits of their respective protégés, Geirrǫðr and Agnarr. Frigg alleges that king Geirrǫðr is stingy to his guests. When Óðinn visits him in disguise to test the truth of the claim, Frigg tricks Geirrǫðr into torturing him. Óðinn embarks on a monologue which gradually reveals his identity. By the end of it Geirrǫðr is dead and kingship has passed to his son, Agnarr. Much of the lore which Óðinn reveals in *Grímnismál* is obscure, and parts of the poem are difficult to interpret. Scholars have assumed that the obscurity indicates that the poem is archaic; some discount the prose framework, regarding it as a later addition to a poem which might have had quite different origins. Much of the poem is in *ljóðahátttr* with metrical irregularity in the catalogue of Óðinn’s names with which the poem closes.

The two poems are classified as wisdom poems and have often been considered together. Critics have largely been interested in the structure and

context of the poems, rather than the mythological lore itself, except insofar as it confirms information about the world given in *Vǫluspá* or by Snorri. For *Vafþrúðnismál* interest has focussed on the rules of the wisdom-contest, trying to suggest why Óðinn, despite his wife's warnings, should risk his head in contest against Vafþrúðnir. Machan has recently edited the poem; in 1994 McKinnell contributed substantially to the debate about Óðinn's motivations, while Ruggerini illuminated various stylistic and structural elements in the poem. Earlier critics, such as Ejder, had assumed that Óðinn learned new information from the giant, although Holtsmark makes clear that a wisdom-contest can only succeed where the questioner is in a position to verify the truth of the answers given.

Grímnismál has attracted more critical attention than *Vafþrúðnismál*. Fleck has suggested that Óðinn's performance is part of a ritual initiating a candidate into the mythological knowledge he needs to be a successful king; he adduces various ethnological parallels to Óðinn's ordeal. Are the details of Óðinn's ordeal related to shamanism, a set of religious practices found among the northern neighbours of the Scandinavians, the Lapps? Fleck's definition of shamanism is strict enough to exclude the possible Norse instances; Buchholz argues that the circumstances of Óðinn's revelations in *Grímnismál* may be helpfully considered as shamanistic. Schjødt follows Fleck in suggesting that the revelations in Óðinn's monologue qualify Agnarr to take over the kingship which Geirrðøðr has forfeited but concludes that the torture between two fires is actually intended to annihilate a dangerous sorcerer who has entered Geirrðøðr's hall (as the prose framework suggests) rather than to initiate Óðinn into a higher state of knowledge. Ralph gives a useful account of the poem's structure based on numerological considerations. He discounts the prose framework as secondary and marks certain of the verses for excision, since they do not fit the numerological scheme.

The two poems provide evidence for the belief that Óðinn travels through the world in disguise, both testing out the wisdom of others and revealing it himself to the chosen auditor. The mythological information outlines the history and geography of the universe for the attentive listener; as Kragerud has demonstrated, it also contributes thematically to the defining situations of the poems: the enmity between gods and giants in *Vafþrúðnismál* and the relationship between gods and men, placed in jeopardy by Geirrðøðr's treatment of Óðinn in *Grímnismál*.

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Vafþrúðnismál

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***Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*: Cosmic History, Cosmic Geography**

Where are the gods? When did they create the world and mankind? And what are they doing now—how do they pass their time? These questions may seem ridiculously rational and anachronistic to ask of Old Norse religious thought and the Norse mythological system. Yet these questions certainly occurred to medieval Christians, who were concerned to map in detail the Other World: to trace the features of Heaven, Hell and Purgatory with their splendid palaces, flowery meadows, flaming lakes of pitch and knife-edge bridges. Medieval Christians had a clear notion of salvation history, cramming it into the 6000-year span since Adam was created. This early Christian interest in such matters points to a very ancient and fundamental tendency to organize knowledge within the epistemological categories of Time and Space. Yet the modern scholar of Old Norse myth gets few clues from Snorri, or from Eddic poetry, as to the exact location of Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr and their relations to one another, or where exactly Hel's domain may be in relation to Niflheimr.

As far as we can judge, Snorri's thirteenth-century audience would be little better informed. Yet we cannot help but construct chronologies and mental maps of the Old Norse mythological world, much like the Norse world-picture in E. V. Gordon's *Introduction to Old Norse* (196). We need such schema to orient ourselves in the universe of Norse myth with its potent oppositions of fire and frost, the hall and the outside; its giant-haunted mountains, fjords, islands and rivers; a half-otherworldly, half-human landscape. Margaret Clunies Ross (50–56) sketches a useful plan of Old Norse mythic space as consisting in a number of settlements: Ásgarðr, the “garðr” of the gods, and Miðgarðr, the “garðr” of humans, lying in more or less concentric and enclosed half-circles at the centre of the imagined universe, with Jötunheimar, the world of the giants, lying somewhere to the east. There is an outer sea where the Miðgarðsormr has its home; there are a number of territories below ground, chiefly the abode of Hel. Other types of underworld, sometimes scarcely distinguished from one another, also seem to exist. The spatial arrangement is envisaged broadly as horizontal, as Gurevich (44) suggests, but with the vertical axis of Yggdrasill and its roots determining the spatial relations of certain “lower” worlds.

Time in the Norse mythic system is apprehended as a series of succeeding ages. Clunies Ross (235–42) delineates it as divided into five periods: first, the beginning of everything, as recalled by the giants; second, the creation of the known world and mankind by the gods; third, the mythic present; fourth, the time of *ragna røk*, the doom of the gods; and finally, the new world of the post-*ragna røk* age. Most Eddic mythological poetry, with the exception of *Völuspá* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, is concerned only with events in the mythic present; the chronology of most of the gods' recorded adventures within that period is unimportant. For most purposes it does not matter whether Þórr's encounter with Óðinn in *Hárbarðsljóð* takes place before or after the gods' feast at the home of Ægir in *Lokasenna*. The poet (or poets) who composed these poems might well have found such a question laughable. Yet in the last fifty years, the mythological poetry of the *Edda* has increasingly been read in the light of its first poem *Völuspá*. In this poem, the *völva* (or prophetess) traces a history of the cosmos which skips allusively from the earliest times, through one significant historical event followed by the next, all within the mythic present. The poem builds, as Nordal argues, into a master narrative of Norse myth, driven by the teleology of *ragna røk*: from the war with the Vanir to the death of Baldr and the binding of Loki. Thus certain historic events—that is, those which relate to *ragna røk*—are incorporated into the master narrative and, linked by the chain of cause and effect, are subjected to chronological ordering within the mythic present.

In this essay I want to argue that *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, among their other concerns, address precisely the questions of Time and Space, history and geography outlined above. Although at one level both poems appear to consist of a multitude of randomly assembled mythological facts, at

another level the facts work together to produce further, often subtextual meanings which could be described as ‘ideological’. Since the two poems are clearly biased in favor of Óðinn, placing the audience on his side in the wisdom-performances he stages, the ideology of *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grimnismál* is Æsir-centred. It sets out the proper relationships of the three major groupings of the Old Norse cosmos: the gods, the giants and humans, as expressed in Time and Space. The gods will, of course, be shown to be dominant, despite the impending threat of *ragna røk*; the subordinate status of both men and giants will be made clear and, in *Grimnismál*, a program for human conduct will be offered.

Our two poems have been linked together as “wisdom poetry” since de Vries’s influential 1930 article “Om visdomsdigtningen.” Traditionally, *Vafþrúðnismál* has been plundered for the information that the mythologems contain, principally as support of or contradiction to the world-history gleaned from *Völuspá*. Since de Vries’s first article, the scholarly consensus has generally been that the poem is intended to present useful mythological facts to an audience, framed by a contest here made more interesting by a wager of heads. This form of didactic framework is common in texts from other European cultures, such as the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II* or the Irish *Colloquy of the Two Sages*. Later commentators have argued that Óðinn stages the contest in order to find out—or to double-check—information about the beginning of the world (e.g. Ejder, 8–11) or about *ragna røk*. It is no coincidence that the penultimate question of the contest (st. 52) should be about Óðinn’s own death. The contest is interpreted as being, like *Völuspá*, ‘about’ *ragna røk*, and it is read in conjunction with poems such as *Lokasenna* to produce a grand mythological narrative, driving ineluctably towards *ragna røk* and presenting the gods as potentially tragic. Recent critical interest focusses on the rules of the contest (McKinnell; Ruggerini); the audience’s pleasure in the text has been redefined as that of suspense: will Óðinn discover what he needs to know before Vafþrúðnir identifies his opponent and destroys him as an interloper in the giant’s hall? McKinnell, for instance, argues that the poem is principally concerned with *ragna røk*; Óðinn wishes to test whether Fate is really immutable, whether he must survive the encounter with Vafþrúðnir in order to die at *ragna røk*, or whether, by having the giant win the contest, the prophecy of *ragna røk* can be proved false.

Whether Óðinn is really intent on testing out the proposition of immutable Fate is, however, not our concern. I argue instead that the poem’s content addresses the history of the universe, as demonstrated in the structure of the questions. Most commentators have divided the questions and answers into three distinct groups:

A) Vafþrúðnir’s questions to Óðinn (sts. 13–18)

- | | | |
|----|-------|------------------------|
| 1. | Name: | the horse of the day |
| 2. | | the horse of the night |

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 3. | | the river between gods
and giants |
| 4. | | the battle-field where
gods and giants will
fight. |

B) Óðinn's first series of questions, introduced by a numerical formula:
(sts. 20–43)

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| 1. | Where do | earth and sky | come from? |
| 2. | | moon and sun | |
| 3. | | day and night | |
| 4. | | winter and
summer? | |
| 5. | Which are older: | | |
| | gods or giants? | | |
| 6. | What was the | | |
| | origin of the | | |
| | oldest mentioned | | |
| | giant? | | |
| 7. | How did he | | |
| | reproduce? | | |
| 8. | What is the | | |
| | earliest thing that | | |
| | Vafþrúðnir | | |
| | remembers? | | |
| 9. | Where does the | | |
| | wind come from? | | |
| 10. | Where did Njǫrðr | | |
| | come from? | | |
| 11. | Who are the | | |
| | Einheriar? | | |
| 12. | How does | | |
| | Vafþrúðnir know | | |
| | all this? | | |

C) Óðinn's six questions introduced by the “fiqlð ek fôr” formula (sts. 44–54)

- | | |
|----|------------------------------------|
| 1. | Who are the human survivors of |
| | <i>ragna røk?</i> |
| 2. | Where will a new sun come from? |
| 3. | Who are the maidens who glide over |
| | the sea? |
| 4. | Who are the Æsir survivors? |
| 5. | What is Óðinn's fate? |

The questions relate to the whole span of mythological time, all five periods as identified by Clunies Ross. The organization of the first group of questions (A), asked by Vafþrúðnir to test Óðinn's fitness as an opponent, makes clear the poem's preoccupations, since it ranges through the past, present and future, sketching in little the themes of the longer part of the poem. The first two questions about the horse of day and of night refer to the past, to the origin of natural phenomena. The third question, about the river Ífing, refers to the mythic present, where hostile gods and giants are still kept apart by the river whose eternally ice-free surface offers no possibility of breaching that separation; the fourth question regarding the battle-field where the gods and giants will finally meet looks forward to the future, to the time of *ragna røk*. We note the spatial concerns of the last two questions, inquiring into particular features of the mythic landscape made significant both by their place in divine history and by their striking geographical peculiarities: the ice-free nature of the river, despite its proximity to the frost-giants, and the huge size of the plain Vígríðr, "a hundred leagues in each direction" (st. 18:4). Thus this short first sequence of questions marks out the broad plan of the questions which Óðinn will put to Vafþrúðnir in the rest of the poem.

The second sequence of the twelve-question group (B) is concerned mainly with the past, shading into the mythic present with the eleventh question (st. 40), which is incomplete in the manuscript but apparently concerned with the Einheriar, the group of warriors whom Óðinn is assembling at Valhøll for *ragna røk*. This is an activity taking place in the mythic present but clearly looking forward to the future when the Einheriar will be called upon to fight real enemies, not simply to practise amongst themselves. The remainder of the questions in group B address the past: both the first age, before the gods were in existence, and the succeeding era, when the gods were creating and ordering the universe. Ejder, in contradistinction to McKinnell, stresses Óðinn's interest in the past rather than the future, and indeed the majority of Óðinn's questions are concerned with the past, in particular with the origins of natural phenomena.

If both *Vqluspá* and Snorri's interpretation of the myth of Ymir in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grimnismál* are correct, then Óðinn was present at the creation of the world and the arrangement of the heavenly bodies. Yet here he is clearly eager to hear about origins: the first four questions of group B begin with the word "hvaðan" ('from where'; see Ruggerini, 182–3). He is told of the origins of earth and sky, created from the body of the giant Ymir in the primordial act of violence; then he is told of the origins of moon and sun, day, night, winter and summer. The origins of these phenomena are expressed in genealogical terms: Vafþrúðnir's answer gives the father of the moon and sun as Mundilfœri ('The One Moving Along at Fixed Times', according to Finnur

Jónsson, s.v.); Delligr (‘The Shining One’) and Nǫrr (‘The Narrow One’) as the fathers of Day and Night respectively; and Vindsvalr (‘Windcool’) and Svasuðr (‘Mild South’; see Machan, 80) as the fathers of Winter and Summer. Genealogy, a very frequent organizational strategy for introducing characters and their immediate history into family sagas, is here deployed on a metaphorical level. Thus the relationship between Dagr and his ‘father’ Delligr is not literal or historical but rather ideogrammatical: the genealogical method is used to expand the depiction of Dagr ‘Day’ by juxtaposing the related concept ‘Shining One.’

As Óðinn questions Vafþrúðnir about these phenomena, he establishes the origins of the very mechanisms by means of which Time passes and in which history is formed: the daily revolution of the sun; the moon in its phases marking out the months; day and night, winter and summer, and the alternating seasons which make up the year. Just as in *Vǫluspá* st. 6, where the gods give names to the different measures of time “morgin ... oc miðian dag / undorn oc aptan” (morning ... and midday/ afternoon and evening),¹ fixing in their paths the wandering sun and moon, so here the beginning of divine history is recalled.

The next four questions in section B continue to engage past history. However, it is no longer a question of eliciting mythological facts about origins; Óðinn, as a thorough historian, seeks to establish Vafþrúðnir’s authority for his knowledge of the past. Who was the oldest being in the universe? The giant Aurgelmir. What was his origin? The frozen poisonous drops of Élivágar. How did he reproduce if there were no giantesses? Parthenogenetically. What is Vafþrúðnir’s place in this genealogical chain? The earliest thing he remembers is Bergelmir lying on his “lúðr” (probably ‘bier’; see Holtsmark and Christiansen). Just as Ari Þorgilsson establishes the veracity of his contemporary informants by relating their early memories of persons who participated in the historical events he recounts in *Íslendingabók* (48), so Vafþrúðnir substantiates his information through a line of genealogically related informants. He remembers Bergelmir and thus is only three generations removed from Aurgelmir, the first and earliest of the giants in this poem. Better authority Óðinn could not hope to find. The god demands final authentication of Vafþrúðnir’s knowledge of the present by asking about what he has learned from his own experience, rather than from inherited lore in the last question of this section: how does Vafþrúðnir know so much about the affairs of gods and giants? Vafþrúðnir’s answer reveals him as a wanderer throughout the worlds, just like Óðinn, gathering knowledge:

Frá iǥtna rúnom, ok allra goða
 ec kann segia satt,
 þviat hvern hefi ec heim um komit;
 nío kom ec heima fyr Niflhel neðan,
 hinig deýia ór helio halir. (st. 43)

(Of the secrets of the giants and of all the gods, / I can tell truly, / for I have been
 into every world; / nine worlds I have travelled through to Mist-hel, / there men

Of the twelve questions in group B, nine are explained by Óðinn's interest in actual history (the origins of natural phenomena) and in historical method (what is the source of his informant's knowledge and how trustworthy is it?). The eleventh question, about the Einheriar, points forward to the final sequence (C), looking from the mythic present to the future culminating in *ragna røk*. Questions nine and ten remain in B. They are concerned with the origins of the wind and the Vanir god, Njǫrðr. Ruggerini characterises these as summary questions (173), recapitulating the form but not the thematic import of earlier ones. Thus they are both "hvaðan" (origin) questions in form: the first is about the wind, a natural phenomenon caused by a giant, while the question about Njǫrðr posits a being who comes neither from the genealogy of the giants nor from among the Æsir: a being who, apparently, will survive *ragna røk* and return home after it. These questions are not specifically concerned with history. The wind question serves to point up the power and ubiquity of the giants; the dauntingly-named Hræsvelgr ('Corpse-swallower') sits at the edge of the sky, (not normally thought of as giant territory). The Njǫrðr question is multivalent; it points backwards to the unknown Powers who created Njǫrðr and looks forward to the final period of Time: the post-*ragna røk* age.

The third sequence of questions (C) is, as many scholars have indicated, primarily concerned with *ragna røk* and post-*ragna røk*. Some gods and humans will survive, but there is no mention of the giants when the world begins anew. Vafþrúðnir's personal defeat in the poem mimics the defeat of the giants in Time despite their priority in the universe; it is a defeat which Vafþrúðnir is forced to admit. New human generations, the second generation of gods, a new sun, and, possibly (the import of sts. 48–9 is much disputed), new arbiters of fate² will appear after *ragna røk*. Even if Óðinn is destroyed, Baldr, we may surmise, will return.

Alf Kragerud's brilliant 1981 article on *Fáfnismál* and its mythological questions succeeds in making sense of *Vafþrúðnismál*'s "jumble of odd fragments of erudition" (Nordal, 104) by taking the mythic facts seriously, not simply for their content, but for their thematic thrust. For Kragerud, the subject of *Vafþrúðnismál* is identical with that of most of the mythological poems of the *Edda*: the fundamental opposition of gods and giants as figured in Time. Against the giants' priority, and the authority this gives them, is set the ultimate survival of gods and humans: the former is the giants' 'trump-card' ("trumfkort;" Kragerud, 35), but the gods' trump-card, deployed by Óðinn so effectively here, is the knowledge of survival and, perhaps, of Baldr's return.

Vafþrúðnismál is mimetic of *ragna røk*, the final confrontation of gods and giants, though the poem results in a temporary triumph for Óðinn. As often in the *Edda*, the conflict between the two groups is displaced into a contest of words, just as in *Fáfnismál* the expected fight between Sigurðr and Fáfnir is

replaced by a verbal battle waged with gnomes, riddles and prophecies (Larrington 1993, 86). The final sequence of *Vafþrúðnismál* (sts. 44–51) depicts gods and humans allied in an idyllic new world, where nourishment comes to humans in the form of dew (cf. the fields which grow without sowing in *Vsp.* 62). Gods and humans settle, breed, eat, and carry weapons, while the giants disappear from the record, an erasure enacted when Viðarr destroys Fenrir in *Vaf.* 53. His victory is symbolic of the giants' final overthrow.

Óðinn's interest in past history throughout the greater part of *Vafþrúðnismál* is not simply a series of red herrings, meant to lull Vafþrúðnir into a false sense of security while Óðinn takes an indirect approach to the crucial question. *Vafþrúðnismál* sets out an allusive exploration of the origins and history of the cosmos, with all that entails for and explains about temporal power. It shows how, with the authority which their knowledge of the origins of the created world gives them, the giants come to be pre-eminent at the close of the mythic present and the coming of the *ragna røk* era. The future in *Vafþrúðnismál* may unfold promisingly as humans and gods begin a new history together; certainly there is no ominous figure like that of Níðhöggr, the dragon of *Völuspá* st. 66, to trouble the vision of the new world. Yet there may be continuities from the past, possibly signaled by the mysterious 'girls of Mógþrasir' of sts. 48–9, which the inhabitants of the future would do well to heed.

Unlike most Eddic mythological poems (*Rígsþula* is the only other real exception), *Grímnismál* is set among humans, in the court of the human king Geirrøðr. The prose frame, with its folk-tale-like story of domestic rivalry, has sometimes been regarded as secondary to the poetic frame (sts. 1–3 and 51–4) which places Óðinn between the fires, receiving a horn of drink from Agnarr and embarking on the monologue which climaxes in the death of the king and tormentor Geirrøðr. Although certain scholars, such as Schröder and Ralph, have wished to discount even this framework, others (notably Jere Fleck) have fully investigated it, linking it to the controversial idea of a Germanic sacred kingship, one of the criteria for which is the possession of numinous knowledge. Fleck also argues for a link to ritual ascetic practices intended to give the sage (Óðinn) access to a hidden mythological wisdom. I shall argue that the prose context is crucial, not so much because of the conjugal rivalry which impresses Joseph Harris as an ancient motif (Harris, 81), but because it points up the central, organizing idea of the poem: Geirrøðr's hospitality and its significance. Geirrøðr is accused by Frigg of being a "matníðingr" (someone who is stingy with food), a failing which, if it is not true when the accusation is made, becomes so. The king fails the test, not only in terms of the Germanic hospitality ethic, but in a far broader context: his failure places his kingship and the well-being of the kingdom in jeopardy, for the human feast is a re-enactment of the archetypal divine feast and the human feasters

must acknowledge their celebration of the gods' original act through sacrifice.

Georges Dumézil has outlined a paradigm for the Indo-European mythological motif of "the feast of the gods" as follows:

- a)
the gods intend to hold a feast for which the sacred drink must be prepared;
- b)
the enemy (giants or demons) try to prevent or disrupt the feast;
- c)
the gods triumph over the enemy and hold a victory feast;
- d)
humans imitate the divine feasting at their own feast.

Elements a through c can be clearly detected in the mythological poems concerned with the feasting of the gods, notably *Hymiskviða* and *Lokasenna* (see below). That Norse feasts were regarded in some senses as ritual is demonstrated strikingly in Snorri's account in *Heimskringla* of Hákon góði's attempts to convert the farmers of the Trøndelag. Descended from king Hálfðan "inn mildi ok inn matarilli" ('Hálfðan the generous and stingy with food'; *Heimskringla* 1: 78), an epithet reminiscent of Frigg's accusation against Geirröðr, Hákon seeks to introduce Christianity at the Frostabing. He proposes the end of sacrifice, the introduction of fasting, and keeping the sabbath holy. His audience objects, observing of Hákon's ancestors that "þeir váru illir af mat, svá þótt þeir væri mildir af gulli" ('they were stingy with food, even if they were generous with gold'; *Heimskringla* I, 169). For the present Hákon is forced to concede that he will sacrifice 'for the harvest and for peace' (170). At the "blótveizla" (sacrificial feast) which follows, Sigurðr jarl, the local ruler, makes sure that the king presides in the high-seat. Sigurðr performs the traditional rites, dedicating the cup to Óðinn. Failure to dedicate the festive drink to Óðinn, in the view of the farmers, would bring about bad luck and poor harvests (171). The deeply-held belief that the human feast and the divine feast are fundamentally connected, as shown in this *Heimskringla* passage, gives a context in which *Grímnismál* can fruitfully be read.

Kragerud (45–7) discusses the mythic allusions surrounding what appears to be the central moment of revelation in the obscure st. 45: the invocation of the drink-bearing valkyries in st. 36 and the information about the tremendous heat of the sun and the protective shield which lies in front of it in sts. 37–9. He suggests that these allusions point towards, and thus confirm, the frame situation at a thematic level, echoing Óðinn's heat and thirst. Earlier stanzas in the monologue also echo the frame situation, developing in particular the idea of the connection between human and divine feasting.

After Agnarr gives Óðinn the horn which releases him from the torture of heat and thirst (the action which permits the monologue to begin), Óðinn turns

immediately to the fundamental relationship between gods and men. Óðinn's perspective on the human world is given in the framing verses where he complains of his ill-treatment; but as he begins to speak he envisages the ideal and splendid world of the gods, 'a sacred land' (st. 4:1). Although his list of the dwellings of the gods offers textual problems,³ the world of the gods is exposed for the audience with twelve⁴ or thirteen halls and lands, each the property of a particular god. At this stage the divine world is not distinguished by physical features—mountains and rivers, forests and fjords, land forms which we find elsewhere in the mythological poetry—but rather by its inhabited settlements. Much like tenth-century Norway, the 'sacred land' consists of a number of territories ruled by an autonomous lord, in whose hall the social practices of lordship are performed. God and goddess drink together (st. 7); the gods assemble for mead-drinking (st. 13); a retinue is chosen (sts. 8, 14); weapons are displayed (st. 9). Divine property is inheritable: Skaði now rules over her father's lands (st. 11), justice is dispensed (st. 15), and treachery and malice are eschewed (sts. 12, 16). Nor is the obligation to avenge kin forgotten (st. 17); since *ragna røk* is not yet at hand, Viðarr, Óðinn's son, occupies himself by practising his horsemanship. Training or tending to one's horses, hawks and hounds is a marker of aristocratic and leisured status in the Eddic texts (cf. *Prymskviða* st. 6 and *Atlakviða* st. 37; see Russom). Gurevich sees the Scandinavian mythological universe as "an aggregate of farmsteads" (45), but certainly in *Grímnismál* there is no apprehension of agricultural work, crop-growing or animal-raising. The gods are too aristocratic to need to work.

Thus the divine world stands in a perfected and archetypal relation to the flawed human world, in particular the hall of Geirrøðr where duties of hospitality are neglected and strangers ill-treated rather than given justice. That divine society should operate much as human society does is to be expected. The gods have an archetypal and exemplary function often overlooked, a function which tends to be obscured by the scandal of *Lokasenna* and the tricksterism of Óðinn. Nevertheless, such plural words for the gods as "bǫnd" ('bonds'), "hǫpt" ('fettters'), and "regin" ('rulers') suggest a community which lives and works closely together.

In a 1988 article on *Lokasenna*, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen suggests that the gods follow the practices of Scandinavian kings in demanding that their subjects feast and entertain them—hence the feasting at Ægir's (the setting of *Lokasenna*) and, by extension (Meulengracht Sørensen does not mention it), the feast revealed in st. 45 of *Grímnismál*. Ægir first tries to avoid the obligation to host the feast by claiming that he has no cauldron suitable for brewing (*Hymiskviða* st. 3), but after the cauldron is successfully fetched from another group of giants, he can no longer demur (st. 39). The rout of Hymir and his forces at the end of *Hymiskviða* seems to result in the giants' temporary submission to the overlordship of the gods, a submission sealed by the feast depicted in *Lokasenna*. In the exhaustive parallels from comparative

mythology which Dumézil cites, it is clear that the feast of the gods is often threatened by giants or demons who seek to disrupt or prevent the gods' gathering. Thus the feast is often one of victory over the forces of the Other, a repressed Other which returns with a vengeance in *Lokasenna* and which is absent from the ideal feast invoked in st. 45 of the present poem, as I shall argue later. In this opening sequence of *Grímnismál* the gods are seen to live a pleasantly leisured, noble existence as exemplary lords and rulers, combining individual power in their personal halls and lands with the collective activity of participation in feasts and councils of state. The catalogue culminates in the description of Valhøll in sts. 18–20, the hall of Óðinn himself. Emphasis is placed on hospitality: the ever-renewed boar, Andhrímnir; Heiðrún the goat with her bountiful, mead-giving udders; and on nobility: the superb vision of Óðinn in his high-seat, a lord with transformed attributes, with wolves tamed to war (“gunntamiðr”), instead of hounds tamed to hunt, by his side, and ravens instead of hawks at his shoulder. The huge scale of the hall and its vast retinue of Einheriar point up the contrast with Óðinn's current position: he is all alone, crouching thirstily on the floor of a hostile hall. The contrast between the behaviour of the human king and the divine model of lordship is marked throughout these verses.

Although at first the divine world in *Grímnismál* is mapped by a social geography of settlements and territories, subsequently the physical features of that world are described. Chiefly these are the rivers which flow down from the horns of the hart, Eikþýrnir, through both the divine and the human worlds. The mighty European rivers which carve up the known Germanic world, the Dvina and the Rhine, mingle with the “Nyt oc Nqt / Nqnn oc Hrqn, Slíð oc Hrið”, (st. 28:4–6), the rivers of another world. Rivers are major transport routes in the human world, but here they seem to function as barriers, separating the known from the unknown world (Hale). The river Þund (st. 21, a hard verse to construe) is difficult for those made cheerful by slaughter (the Einheriar?) to cross, while Þórr seems to be obliged to wade through rivers in the divine world to go to a judgment seat beneath Yggdrasill.

Another barrier, the gate Valgrind, seems to block the way to the land of the gods (st. 22). The knowledge of how its lock works is restricted to a very few; this theme of the exclusivity of divine wisdom is developed further in the next few verses. The land of the gods seems to approach the human in the opening movement of *Grímnismál*, yet its separateness and distance are also stressed. The bridge “ásbrú” which should connect the worlds, across which Helgi rides to return to Valhøll in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, st. 49, is aflame and cannot be crossed. Men and gods are at cross-purposes.

Grímnismál continues with a catalogue of the fauna of the divine world: the harts, snakes, squirrel, and dragon which live around and upon Yggdrasill, gradually destroying it as they consume it. As the horizontal plane has been mapped in the catalogue of the gods' dwellings, the vertical plane now comes into focus, making clear the spatial relation between the gods' realm and the

territory of the other major groups in the cosmos:

þriár rœtr standa á þríá vega

undan asci Yggdrasils;

Hel byr undir einni, annarri hrímpursar,

þriðio mennzcir menn. (st. 31)

(Three roots there grow in three directions / under the ash of Yggdrasill; / Hel

lives under one, under the second, the frost-giants, / the third, humankind.)

Óðinn's perspective broadens now from a close focus on the 'sacred land' out into a more inclusive view of the universe, situating the realm of death, of frost-giants and of humans below the central point of the divine land, Yggdrasill. The gods now seem to exist above humans, not contiguous with them.⁵

Pain and suffering are part of the divine world, just as they are part of the human world; Óðinn's agony and the forthcoming condemnation of Geirrøðr, his torturer, are mirrored in the decay and pain of Yggdrasill with its gnawing dragons and serpents. While Þórr wades through rivers to come to judgment at the tree of Yggdrasill in st. 29, the other Æsir follow on their splendid horses in st. 30. Though in these two mythic clusters the point appears to be the naming of the rivers and the listing of the horses, the symbolic import contributes to the theme of judgment, one which develops gradually through the poem, but which has been heralded from the outset by the juxtaposition and comparison of human and divine conduct.

As Óðinn's monologue nears its climax, the two worlds seem to be set to converge. The threat of world destruction if the shield before the sun should fall away (st. 38:4–6) hints at the terrible consequences when the necessary barrier between gods and men is breached, when divine laws of hospitality and sacrifice are not obeyed. The human world was created violently from Ymir's dismembered body parts, as recalled in sts. 41:1–2; the rest of the universe has the same grisly origin in a raw material which is anthropomorphic at a most fundamental level.⁶ As the worlds of gods and humans were created together in violence, so the incursion of the divine into the human threatens further violence.

Finally, with st. 45, the nexus between human and divine is made clear: what happens in the divine world and what happens in the human world are inextricably linked. The gods troop in to feast at Ægir's, ready to receive hospitality just as Óðinn had come to Geirrøðr's hall, intent on testing his host, and hoping that his protégé will treat him well. Geirrøðr has failed in his duty of hospitality towards a guest, but more importantly, he has failed to sacrifice to the god, whose sustenance and superiority are thereby threatened. At the very start of the poem, Agnarr's ceremonial giving of the horn is, unbeknownst to Agnarr himself, an act of sacrifice, a dedication of festive drink to the god without which a feast should not begin (compare the actions of Sigurðr *jarl* above). Óðinn recognises the nature of Agnarr's action when he blesses the boy, deliberately using the language of invocation (st. 3:1–2).

To give drink to the god is to worship him: Agnarr and Óðinn are now aligned in the right relationship of worshiper and worshiped, whereas, by failing to honour the god, Geirrøðr had prejudiced the relationship between human and divine, a state of affairs fraught with danger for both parties.

The transfer of divine patronage from father to son is enacted in st. 42 with the bestowal of the “hylli” (favour) of Ullr and Óðinn upon whoever removes the mysterious kettles. The verse is notoriously obscure, but we may assume that it is Agnarr, in a continuation of his exemplary behavior at the beginning of *Grímnismál*, who ends the ordeal for Óðinn and becomes the beneficiary of this promise, since Agnarr replaces his father as king at the end of the poem. Then in st. 45 the divine archetype of the human custom is shown: the gods enter for their feast summoned by the “vilbiörg” (‘wished-for sustenance’) which Agnarr’s horn represents, ready to accept sacrifice once again. The theophany in st. 45, Óðinn’s uncovering of his face, leads to the gradual revelation of his identity through the recital of Odinic names which follows, culminating in the terrible destruction of the inhospitable king. Punishment comes to the one who failed to recognize the power of the god and who acted against the prevailing ethic of hospitality; reward to the worshiper who, through the humane action of relieving the sufferer’s thirst, sacrifices to the god.

The geography of *Grímnismál* is social, mapping the “heilakt land” and showing how the gods live in harmonious community with one another. No threat from the giants is perceived: Þjazi is dead and his daughter lives peacefully on his property, apparently assimilated into the world of the gods; Ymir is dismembered, forming the foundation of this peaceful world; Ægir is hosting the gods at a triumphal feast. *Ragna røk* seems very distant; even the Einheriar function as an ideally ordered retinue rather than as an ominous reminder of the final battle. The mapping of the divine land exemplifies how human lords should structure their lives, by imitating the customs of the gods within the microcosm of the human hall. The gods’ separateness and authority is marked by their existence elsewhere in a distant upper world, but their continuing awareness of and (self-)interest in the human world is intimated by Óðinn’s revelation. As he opens the way between the worlds he shows how the human feast must imitate the archetypal feast, maintaining the superiority of the gods over humankind as the feast demanded in *Hymiskviða* and given in *Lokasenna* signals the subjection of the giants. Where universal custom — the rule of hospitality and respect for the gods—is breached, the god manifests himself terrifyingly in the human world. *Grímnismál* thus plots the boundaries of the human and the divine, laying bare the ritual and sacrificial structures which underpin both the worlds of Ásgarðr and of Miðgarðr.

Grímnismál is thus closer to the human and social wisdom of *Hávamál* than previous scholars have allowed. Its stylistic similarities with *Vafþrúðnismál*, through the deployment of mythic facts in a symbolic mode, has obscured the fact that *Grímnismál* is, at one level, about how humans should behave in

relation to the divine: they should follow the divine example. In *Hávamál*, Óðinn's experiences are multiple and contradictory rather than archetypal; his drunken behaviour as a guest (st. 14:1–3) is quite the opposite of the ethic of moderation and caution which the opening sequence promotes as appropriate for the stranger in the hall. The god's behaviour surpasses what is permitted to the human: his drunkenness results in great benefit for both gods and humanity by winning the mead of poetry (Larrington 1993, 24–5). Óðinn does not offer himself as archetype or as moral lesson in *Hávamál*; his anecdotes bear out the variety of human experience and the adaptable wisdom needed to respond appropriately. In *Grimnismál*, on the contrary, the themes of hospitality and its opposite, starvation and torture, suffering and judgment, violence and the pleasant aristocratic lives of the gods, are harnessed to a consistent moral lesson: the importance of correctly aligning, then steadily maintaining, relations between the human and the divine.

At the beginning of this essay I posed a series of questions about the gods: where are they, what are they doing, when do they perform the deeds told of them? I do not mean to suggest that for the original thirteenth-century audiences of the Codex Regius, or of Snorri's *Edda*, that the gods were anywhere but dead and burnt, or in their grave-mounds at Uppsala (*Ynglinga saga*, chs. 9, 10) or providing a convenient disguise for the Christian devil as the narratives of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr *helgi* in *Heimskringla* and *Flatayjarbók* suggest (Harris and Hill). But the poets of *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grimnismál* imagine the gods as alive and capable of manifesting themselves; they exist in a knowable and mappable elsewhere, contiguous with and capable of permeating the human world. Most often the gods were occupied in keeping the giants in their place by the strategies of assimilation, domination, appropriation of their possessions, or by violence, until *ragna røk* should come. Just as their human followers fought against enemies or enjoyed the fruits of peace in their halls, each god ruled over his or her individual domain, but they also gathered together harmoniously to assert a collective identity, to take counsel or to feast. In showing the gods triumphant over the giants and in a patronizing yet mutually beneficial relationship with humans, of all the Eddic poems our two poems come closest to providing a philosophical understanding of the Norse gods and their place in the Norse mythic world.

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Notes

1. Eddic citations are from Neckel and Kuhn; translations are from Larrington 1996.
2. The girls of *Mǫgþrasir* (st. 49) seem to come from three different tribes, like the Norns in *Fáfnismál* st. 13. If the two groups are identical, then these women may represent new figures of Fate. They are described in the present / future tense; thus they may already be present in the world, or be expected in the new world. It is equally possible that the girls of *Mǫgþrasir* are figures belonging generically to riddle rather than to the genre of mythic information, like the girls mentioned in *Baldrs draumar* st. 12, whose identities are quite unguessable.
3. The second half of st. 4 can scarcely fit the first half, and some disturbance is apparent in st. 6 (de Vries 1952 and Ralph).
4. According to the poem's internal numeration.
5. Elsewhere the gods and giants certainly seem to exist on the same horizontal plane, as in the geography of *Hárbarðsljóð* for example, but since the gods interact so little with humans it is difficult to evidence a consistent spatial dimension when the gods journey to humankind.
6. Notably, apart from the brief reference to the world of the frost-giants in st. 31, this is the only role for the giants in *Grímnismál*. Right relations between gods and humans, not the superiority of the gods to the giants, is at issue here.

“Cursing with the Thistle: ‘*Skírnismál*’ 31, 6–8, and O E Metrical Charm 9, 16–17”

Joseph Harris

Skírnismál or Fqr Skírnir

Telling the story of Skírnir’s wooing of the giantess Gerðr, *Skírnismál* consists mostly of dialogue. Freyr’s servant Skírnir sets off for the court of Gymir, the father of the giantess with whom Freyr has fallen in love from a distance. Gerðr is reluctant to succumb to Freyr and much of the poem consists of Skírnir’s threats before Gerðr concedes defeat. Skírnir returns to Freyr with the news that the girl has agreed to a rendezvous in nine nights’ time. The poem is composed in *ljóðaháttir*; in the curse-section the meter becomes increasingly irregular.

In the last thirty years, *Skírnismál* has excited different kinds of critical interest. Originally interpreted as a nature-myth, in which the fertility god seeks the yielding of the earth in a yearly ritual pattern, the poem has been regarded as a perfect romance or even courtly in tone, despite the violence and aggression which Skírnir displays. Dronke (1962) adduces parallels from comparative mythology to suggest that Gerðr’s resistance to the proffered sacred marriage is part of an ancient mythological complex of behaviors. Lönnroth and Mitchell use structuralist approaches to suggest that *Skírnismál* is fundamentally concerned with mediating solutions to social conflict: the problems involved in weighing the desires of a young couple against the needs of the clan or the resolution of feud through intermarriage. Larrington has analysed the poem in feminist terms, suggesting that the thirteenth-century audience of the Codex Regius version may have interpreted the poem as being about a clash of gender interests. Motz uses comparative mythology to suggest that the antagonism between Vanir and giantess may reflect real historical struggle between competing cults. Bibire suggests that the story need originally have had no fixed meaning corresponding to a particular historical or social context; it is simply a re-telling of an ancient story pattern,

the liaison between Vanir god and giantess. He compares Snorri's version of the same tale in *Gylfaginning*, in which the curse is omitted, stressing the variability of possible interpretations.

Steinsland, in the longest recent study, suggests that the notion of the sacred marriage is employed for political purposes: to support the institution of kingship and legitimise the king's relationship with the land. Peter Orton has juxtaposed the curse with the Old English poem *The Wife's Lament* to suggest that the conditions with which Gerðr is threatened in the curse may reflect pagan rituals of exclusion. Harris's article, which we reprint here, also makes fruitful use of Old English parallels. Broadly structuralist in its approach, it demonstrates the poem's concern with fertility and order, even as Skírnir's curse sketches the opposite, the consequence of Gerðr's refusal of the god's proposition.

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Cursing with the Thistle: ‘*Skírnismál*’ 31, 6–8, and OE Metrical Charm 9, 16–17

Summary. The disputed passage in the *Skírnismál* curse (“ver þú sem þistill, / sá er var þrunginn / í ǫnn ofanverða”) can be clarified by comparison to a magical simile in the curse from OE Metrical Charm 9: “Eall he weornige, swa syre wudu weornie, / swa breðel seo swa þystel...”; in both the cursed person is imperatively likened to a brittle autumn thistle about to burst with its load of seed. This interpretation is supported by occurrences of *þrunginn* in other Eddic passages, by plant images in the OE Metrical Charms, and by reference to the general folklore phenomenon of association between human life and dying or waning natural objects. The simile, deriving from an old, perhaps common Germanic tradition of cursing with the thistle, is found to be especially apt in *Skírnismál*, where the curse systematically creates a negative transformation of the hoped-for world of the maiden Gerðr. Finally, elements of the *Skírnismál* curse are analysed according to their “paradigmatic structure,” and a speculation is offered on the relation of the magical simile to this structure.

The wooing of Freyr, through his emissary Skírnir, is accomplished by means of a long and powerful curse. As the main part of the curse approaches its climax, just before Skírnir supplies the magically powerful mythic history of his “taming wand” and begins the litany of gods who will hate Gerðr (sts. 32–33), the curser reaches a crescendo in *galdralag* meter (st. 31):

Með þursi þríhǫfðoðom þu scalt æ nara,
eða verlaus vera;
þitt geð grípi,
þic morn morni!¹

[With a three-headed monster must you ever dwell, or else be without a man.
May your lust take hold (of you), may the wasting-sickness waste you.]

It is with surprise, then, that we find in the remainder of this stanza a homely comparison of the girl to a thistle:

ver þú sem þistill, sá er var þrunginn
í ǫnn ofanverða;

These lines have never received a fully satisfactory explanation.

In defiance of normal growing seasons, Dettler-Heinzel imagine the girl compared to a solitary thistle that ‘springs up’ (*þryngva*) in the mown field at the end of harvest.² Though they cite Eddic parallels for the trope of the lonely plant (esp. *Háv.* 50 and *Hm.* 5), the interpretation that became standard is that of Magnus Olsen who referred to an Estonian harvest custom which is described by Mannhardt as follows; “Man legt auf jedes Fensterloch eine grosse Distel und auf diese einen Stein. Dann kann der Kobold während des Dreschens das Korn nicht fortschleppen” [A big thistle is placed in every window and on it a stone. Then the daemon cannot steal the grain during the threshing].³ Olsen identified these weighted thistles with the *þrunginn* thistle of the poem and found it fitting that in a celebration of a fertility rite Gerðr should be threatened with association with the thistle spirit, an enemy of grain. He supported this interpretation with reference to a runic inscription from the stave church at Borgund that seemed to mention ‘the pressed thistle.’ However, the harvest custom is attested from Estonia and from modern times, and the animistic basis of Mannhardt’s explanation of the custom now seems questionable.⁴ Moreover, *Skírnismál* specifies the moment as *í Qnn ofanverða* (‘at the end of harvest’)⁵ while the Estonian custom is practiced “sobald das erste Korn der neuen Ernte zum Dörren aufgestellt wird” [as soon as the first grain of the new harvest is arranged for drying], thus nearer the beginning. (Nor does *var* [was] of the poem suggest a custom but a single event.)⁶ Nevertheless, Olsen’s explanation was widely accepted.⁷

Jöran Sahlgren, however, offered a series of objections and a different explanation of the *þrunginn* thistle. Citing support for *þryngva* in the senses “sammanträngd” [forced together] and “nach hinten gedrängt” [pushed aside], he constructs a plausible image of accidentally harvested thistles being plucked from among the grain as the threshing begins and cast aside; he translates: “Var du lik tistein, som trängdes hop (dvs. kastades bort i en hög) vid skördeandens slut” [Be like the thistle which was collected (that is, thrown away into a pile) at the end of harvest] and further explains: “Med andra ord: Måtte du bli lika torr och föraktad, som tisteln, som slängdes bort vid trösken” [In other words: May you become as dry and scorned as the thistle which was thrown away during the threshing] (p. 255). In the meantime Olsen revised his interpretation of the runic inscription which now reads: *tistill, mistill, ok inn þriði þistill ‘tistill* (?), mistletoe, and thistle the third,’ undercutting his explanation of the lines in *Skírnismál*.⁸ The most recent commentator on the passage, Ursula Dronke, elects for an interpretation slightly simpler than Sahlgren’s but like his independent of the Estonian custom: “She is regarded as a menace to human prosperity, like a thistle in the corn: may she be crushed in the threshing like the destructive weed she is” (p. 256).

The passage can be further illuminated and Dronke’s sensible interpretation

somewhat modified by comparison to Old English Metrical Charm 9 “For Theft of Cattle.”⁹ After a prose introduction, the verse begins with an appeal to the mysterious *Garmund, godes ðegen* [god’s thane], to bring home the stolen cattle (ll. 6–9).¹⁰ It goes on to proscribe any harbor to the stolen cattle (ll. 10–11) and, more generally, all success in the theft (l. 13).¹¹ The climax of the charm is a direct curse on anyone plotting theft of cattle:

*Eall be weornige swa syre wudu weornie,
swa breðel seo swa pystel,
se ðe ðis feoh oðfergean þence
oððe ðis orf oðehtian ðence* (ll. 16–19).¹²

[May he quite waste away just as dry wood wastes away, be just as fragile as a thistle, he who thinks to carry off these cattle or thinks to drive away this livestock.]

Here we have a context similar to the problematic lines in *Skírnismál*: a curse in which the cursed person is likened to a thistle. The simile in both acts with the familiar force of magical sympathy to associate the victim with a natural object that is waning or dying (e.g., the waning moon) or with an artificial pattern of diminution (e.g., Storms No. 3). Fully comparable are the magical similes in OE Metrical Charm 12: “Clinge þu alswa col on heorþe, / scring þu alswa scerne awage, / and weorne alswa weter on ambre,” etc. [May you dwindle away like a coal on the hearth, waste away like dung on a wall, evaporate like water in a bucket]. The idea expressed in l. 16, then is clear: ‘May he quite waste away just as dry wood wastes away,’¹³ and folklore in general frequently couples the withering of a person with that of a plant, usually a tree.¹⁴

The thistle in our passage, however, is not withering but *breðel* (‘fragile’),¹⁵ an epithet that does not sort well with the impressions of most who have encountered the hardy thistle. However, juxtaposition of the thistle with the “sere wood” of l. 16 and comparison to *Skírnismál* suggest that the thistle imagined here is “fragile” because already dry, ready to burst late in the autumn. And conversely, comparison of the *breðel* English thistle with the *þrunginn* Norse one suggests that the explanations of the latter by Dronke and Sahlgren (‘crushed in the threshing’; “kastades bort i en hög”) should give place to the interpretation of *þrunginn* already offered by Reichardt:

Rígsþula 4: *þrunginn sáðom* vollgestopt, gequollen (vom Brot) [stuffed full, swollen with bran (concerning a loaf of bread)].

HHu II, 45: *þrunginn ekka* mit Sorge bis zum Bersten erfüllt [filled to bursting with sorrow].

Fjǫlsv. 24: *þryngva ekka* mit Sorge bis zum Bersten erfüllen [to fill to bursting with sorrow].

So wie die Distel nach dem Sommer bis zum Bersten erfüllt ist mit Samen, dem

Zerspringen nah, so wird [Gerðr] von ihrer unbefriedigten Begierde erfüllt sein, der Zerstörung entgegensehend [Just as the thistle is filled to bursting with seed after the summer, so will Gerðr be filled by her unsatisfied lust, looking forward to her destruction] (p. 491).

The OE charms provide images of “strong” plants resisting *external* forces, for example, the plantain in “The Nine Herbs Charm” (No. 2) withstood the weight of chariots and cavalcades of queens, brides and bulls, and the prose instructions for Metrical Charm 4 call for “feverfew and the red nettle that grows through (the wall of) a house and plantain.”¹⁶ But in Charm 9 a “weak” or rather weakening plant is called for, and the “sere wood” and “fragile” thistle are succumbing to *internal* forces. This is almost certainly the meaning of *þrunginn* in *Skírnismál* also.

Magnus Olsen asked, “Hvorfor sammenlignes Gerd netop med tidslen?” [Why is Gerðr compared precisely with the thistle?] I believe the answer does not lie wholly in a conception of the thistle as opposed to fertility (as argued by Olsen); for despite grain-stealing thistle daemons there appears to be no one folkloristic role of the thistle to account for its use in *Skírnismál*.¹⁷ Nor is the explanation a purely social one as in the realistic agricultural role of the weed in the interpretations of Sahlgren and Dronke or purely poetic or rhetorical as asserted by Reichardt. Rather the answer must begin with the probable existence of an old, perhaps common Germanic, tradition of cursing with the thistle—a role that its form with prominent “head,” autumnal “fragility,” and annual “death” might easily suggest. The *Skírnismál* poet’s accomplishment lies not in having invented the thistle simile but in having selected from among the topoi available the traditional, magical simile that would be poetically most effective. Thus Gerðr is not compared to “coal on a hearth,” “dung on a wall,” “water in a pail,” or even to dry wood rotting. The poet’s choice of the thistle is more apt: the thistle is anthropomorphic; and its brittle dryness in autumn is the antithesis of the fluid suppleness of a nubile girl in the spring of life.¹⁸

A curse creates for the accursed a negative of the hoped-for or expected world, reflecting inversely the normal world of the curser and his victim. In *Skírnismál* all the elements of the curse proper are negative transformations of the hoped-for world of the maiden Gerðr and systematically threaten the inversion of all the hopes and expectations of fruitful womanhood; this relationship between the world of the curse and the alternative offered by Freyr, implicit throughout the poem, is expressed openly in certain phrases, such as: *grát at gamni* [tears instead of entertainment]; *horfa beimi ór, snugga beliar til* [look away from the world, hanker after hell]; and in the contrast between the drink in the world of the curse, *geita hland* [goat piss], and the *æðri dryccia* [better drink] she will never have (i.e., the goat’s mead of the gods). She is to marry a three-headed troll or remain without a man if she refuses the glorious god of fertility, to suffer lust, madness, and physical torture, to hate her food, and to subsist in the hateful society of trolls.

This is the context of the comparison to the brittle autumn thistle, and although the OE charms show that magical similes are common in curses, the thistle simile is the only one used in the *Skírnismál* curse.¹⁹ Its appearance at the climax—or at least one climax—of the curse must have been carefully calculated, and its positioning and the fact that it is the only magical simile used give it rhetorical effect. However, its use is not *rein poetisch* [purely poetic] (Reichardt, p. 491) but first of all magical and only secondarily poetic and rhetorical.

Finally, we may analyse the curse proper as “myth” according to its “paradigmatic structure” or conceptual order and without regard to its sequential ordering (rhetoric) or its dramatic application to Gerðr.²⁰ All the elements of the mythic world adumbrated in the curse proper fall into four symmetrically conceived spheres of life:

Social Life (environment, reputation, Private Life (sex)
etc.)

þic gumna synir ... æva sé; at
undrsíonom þú verðir ... goðom; ara
þúfo á scaltu ár sitia; horfa heimi ór,
snugga heliar til; iǫtna gǫrðom í; til
hrímpursa hallar; gapiðu grindom frá;
fyr nágrindr neðan; á viðar rótom;
vílmegir ...

[may the sons of men never see you;
you will become a freak in the sight of
gods; you shall sit on the perch of
eagles; look away from the world,
hanker after hell; in the settlement of
giants; to the hall of frost-giants; may
you gape from behind fences; down
below the carrion-fences; among the
roots of the tree; slaves ...]

Mental Life (emotions, well-being)
tópi oc ópi, tiǫsull (?) oc ópoli; tár
með trega; grát at gamni; leiða með
tárom trega; (not part of the curse
proper: sváran súsbreca oc tvennan
trega).

[rage and howling, irritation and
dissatisfaction; tears and grief; tears
instead of entertainment; to
suffer sorrow with tears; heavy grief
and double woe.]

Með þursi þríhofðoðom þú scalt æ
nara eða verlaus vera; Hrímgrímnir
heitir þurs er þic hafa scal; þitt geð
grípi; (not part of the curse proper: ec
fyrbyð ... ?c fyrirbanna, manna glaum
maní, manna nyt maní).

[With a three-headed monster you
shall ever dwell or else be without a
man; Hrímgrímnir is the name of the
monster who will have you to wife;
may your lust take hold (of you); I
forbid ... I refuse the joyous noise of
mankind to the girl, enjoyment of men
to the girl.]

Physical Life (pain, food)
Tramar gneyþa þic scola; þú scalt ...
kranga kosta laus, kranga kosta vǫn;
þic morn morni; matr sé þér meirr leiðr
enn manna hveim inn fráni ormr með
firom; þér ... geita hland gefi! áðri
dryccio fá þú aldregi.

[Vile things shall torment you; you
must crawl without food, without
hope; may wasting-
sickness waste you; may food be more
repulsive to you than a bright snake

among men is to any man; to you may
they serve goat piss! A better drink
may you never get.]

This table omits the thistle, the only element of the curse proper that cannot fit one or another of the categories. It falls outside all four categories because it is removed to the more mysterious world of metaphor and is metaphorically applicable to all four of the categories: the thistle as hated weed (Social Life), dry and spiritually and sexually inert in the fall (Mental and Private Life), on the point of bursting and perishing (Physical Life). Thus the thistle simile seems to stand as a summary, reflecting but not participating in the categories of the conceptual structure of the curse, and as the mysterious “other” it comes, perhaps, as the curse’s own most powerful element.²¹

The answer to Olsen’s question, then, is complex. At the primary, magico-traditional level, Gerðr is compared to a thistle because such a comparison was among the magical similes made available by cursing tradition. The selection precisely of the thistle as especially apt and the placing of the simile were principally dramatic and rhetorical decisions based in part on the unflattering implications of the contrast with the fertile and fruitful alternative offered by Freyr. On a deeper level, however, the curser’s leap from direct creation of a negative world to the indirection of the metaphorical cannot be assigned to either only magical or only poetic motivation. We are here at a structural level where rhetoric and magic are indistinguishable.

Afterword

Returning to the subject after reviewing the literature since the publication of “Cursing with the Thistle,” I found I had less to regret than expected. Criticisms on the specific issue of the thistle image seem to “wither” upon close consideration. Heizmann (1996), followed by Dronke (1997: 411) and von See *et al.* (1993: 122), argues that Reichardt’s study of *þrunginn* yields, in my application, an unsuitable sense because the autumnal thistle would be redolent of fertility. But death by bursting in the process of self-replication as a hated weed is hardly the dream of a young girl. Heizmann’s specific counterproposal relies on a sixteenth-century Icelandic magician’s handbook where an incised symbol is hung up together with “þyrnigras” to protect a farm against intruders; he sees this as a culturally more proximate analogue of Olsen’s Estonian harvest custom. The apotropaic function in both cases is convincing; but the unique ‘thorn grass’ may or may not be a thistle. (Heizmann, who is admittedly the acknowledged expert on Old Norse plant names [Heizmann, 1993], expresses himself quite cautiously about this ‘thorn grass,’ [1996: 98]; and since ON has both ‘thorn’ and ‘thistle,’ often occurring together, especially as translations of or allusions to *spinās et tribulos* of Gen. 3: 17–18, it is hard to see why ‘thorn’ should mean ‘thistle’ in the passage under discussion, despite the one Icelandic application of ‘thorn’ to the thistle

cited in Heizmann 1996: n. 28.)

In any case, *Skírnismál*'s curse ('be you like the thistle') could, if at all, agree only with a secondary aspect (hung up, weighted down) of the magical use of the thistle in these two customs. Against this the Old English passage offers an explicit cursing simile, a nearly perfect analogue. Von See *et al.* (1993: 124–26) recognize this and the non-agreement of apotropaic uses. The biblical parallels held up by Steinsland (1991: 112–13; 1990) and von See *et al.* (1993: 125) seem to me false scents, and I would stick by the parallel (as far as it goes) of Old English *breðel* with *þrunginn*, of which Reichardt's interpretation is still superior (1939, cited in footnote 1). Heizmann's effort (noted but not affirmed by von See *et al.*, 1993: 125) to throw doubt on the Old English passage seems to me unsuccessful. No recent research has entered these discussions from the Old English side; Sandmann (1975: 128) recognizes the agreement between the two instances of the thistle curse, but takes it no further. If one could accept Sandmann's identification (1975: 124–5) of 'Garmund, thane of God' in the Old English charm with Freyr as half of the Germanic equivalent of the Aśvins/dioscurii relationship charged with protection of *feoh* [cattle/property], then a deeper relationship would offer itself. But...

The earliest readers of my article offered a criticism I still regard as significant: two cursing thistle-similes can hardly make up, as I claim in passing, "a tradition" (although this claim is accepted by von See *et al.*, 1993: 126). But this brief article was not the place to mount an extensive argument that the two Northwest European oral literatures in question share a history, many elements of common poetics, and a formulaic diction pool; and after three decades I am even more convinced that "tradition," conceived as intertextuality, is still the best explanation for most such analogies. Heizmann is of course right to prefer *intra*-cultural parallels where they exist; in this case, however, the exact wording, grammar, and function in the sister literature support a better explanation, and the modern Icelandic ritual employs similar materials for a different purpose. I should, however, have strengthened the claim of "traditional" by further instances of the magical utility of the thistle, even though they were more distantly related to the passage in question than the close Old English analogue. Thus I mentioned only one runic thistle formula (from Olsen 1957, cited in footnote 8) and should have cited Olsen 1964 (41–42) with his more extensive collection (which has been repeated by several later commentators). Olsen's 1964 explanation of the thistle curse in *Skírnismál* is, however, inferior to that of his foundational article of 1909 (cited in footnote 3): in 1964 the thistle is (as in Sahlgren 1927, cited in footnote 4) simply cast out of the harvest grain with other trash, but Olsen obviously still thinks that *þrunginn* requires the refuse to be buried under stones (nowhere mentioned in *Skírnismál*, and apparently a hold-over from the Estonian custom).

In 1975 I thought that a satisfactory interpretation of the thistle curse

required the kind of artistic integrity in the poem that my teacher at the time, Dronke, so eloquently advocated (1962, cited in footnote 7); and so I rejected Reichardt's idea that the curse was interpolated. "Interpolation" still seems inapplicable. But Berendsohn's passing comment (1934: 258) that the poem was composed to preserve the primitive curse, as this insight has been developed and refined by Randlev (1985: esp. 152), has come to appeal to me: a gifted (younger) poet incorporates an (older) poem or fragment into a complex composition based on current myths. (Motz 1996, though overstated, is compatible with this view.) This way of having our cake (a poetically successful whole) and eating it too (recognizing foreign bodies) is well attested in the older Germanic corpus (e.g., Klingenberg 1974) and should not surprise a reader of, say, T. S. Eliot. Randlev (1985: 152) also cites the sixteenth-century Icelandic magician's handbook (as interpreted by Lindqvist 1921) to show that, beside other forms of magic, cursing is not rare in love contexts; this answers several questions about the integrity of the compound final form (Klingenberg's *Großform*) including those raised by the fascinating Vedic comparison of Lommel (1936: 251).

Finally (and to conclude at the macro level), I now find my structural analysis (paradigmatic structure based on binarism) timid and tentative, but not obviously erroneous; Polomé (1987: 464, n. 5) accepts it with a caveat concerning the role of the thistle simile. Meanwhile much more has been done in the structural vein, so much that the vein may be exhausted. At the time I worried about whether a structural analysis could have validity for a part of a whole, but the article, which tries to solve a very limited problem and to focus suggestively on one part of the poem, necessarily implies a view of the whole that derives from Olsen. Few, if any, of the subsequent holistic interpretations (e.g., Lönnroth 1977, Mitchell 1983 [both cited after the introduction above], Klingenberg 1996) seem utterly incompatible with my view; I must respectfully differ, however, with Heinrichs 1997: *Skírnismál* may be as "late" as some current scholarship is claiming (though I doubt it), but it cannot be an ironical allegory written by a Christian scholar.

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Notes

1. Cited from *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. G. Neckel, I. Text, 4th rev. ed. by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962). The “curse proper” (which term I will use to mean only the direct magical injunctions in imperative or optative mood) falls into three parts linked by descriptive comments of magical significance: 26:1–3 descriptive introduction; 26:4–29:3 curse; 29:4–7 descriptive link; 30–31 curse; 32–34 descriptive link and call upon witnesses; 35 curse; 36 descriptive conclusion. The first two parts of the curse proper are closely linked, and st. 35 seems oddly placed in the midst of Skírnir’s peroration (cf. Konstantin Reichardt, “Die Liebesbeschwörung in Fôr Skírnis,” *JEGP* 38 [1939], 487, 492–93 and Lee M. Hollander, “*Skírnismál* 294 ...,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 82 (1969), 243–44).

2. F. Detter and R. Heinzel, edd., *Sæmundar Edda* (Leipzig, 1903), II, 204.
3. Magnus Olsen, "Fra gammelnorsk myte og kultus," *Maal og minne*, 1909, pp. 22–23; Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Wald- und Feldkulte*, I (Berlin, 1875), 69.
4. Nevertheless, some of the customs Mannhardt cites in connection with the thistle (and of course other plants) are undoubtably animistic (e.g., p. 15); cf. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (= *HDA*), col. 301 (thistle as *Seelenpflanze*). A similar objection made by Jöran Sahlgren (*Eddica et scaldica*, I [Lund, 1927], 253–54) fallaciously relies on the assumption that the thistle can have only one role in folk belief; cf. references to *HDA* here and below.
5. Hugo Gering, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zu den Liedern der Edda* (Halle, 1903) interprets *qnn* as a hapax legomenon meaning "Vorhaus [vestibule] (?)"; in *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* I (Halle, 1927), 231 he rejects this in favor of Olsen's (and Detter-Heinzel's) "at the end of harvest," even though a sense connected with "house" sorts equally well with the Estonian harvest custom and is at least possible philologically.
6. This objection is also raised by Sahlgren, p. 254.
7. Olsen's reading of the poem as a whole as a reflection of a ritual marriage connected with the fertility cult, deriving support from his treatment of the thistle passage, became "standard" in the sense that subsequent scholars had to take a position on it; the contemporary consensus agrees with his overall argument, while taking cognizance of the criticisms of details raised by Sahlgren (pp. 211–303): Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*, 2nd ed. I (Copenhagen, 1920), 176; Gering, *Kommentar*, I, 231; Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd rev. ed. II (Berlin, 1957), 178–81; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Íslenzkar bókmenntir í fornöld*, I (Reykjavík, 1962), 276–80; Ursula Dronke, "Art and Tradition in *Skirnismál*" in *English and Medieval Studies ... J. R. R. Tolkien ...*, ed. Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London, 1962), pp. 250–68. Specific comments in agreement with Olsen's explanation of the thistle passage are: Finnur Jónsson, *De gamle Eddadigte* (Copenhagen, 1932), pp. 78–79; Gering, *Kommentar*, I, 231; R. C. Boer, *Die Edda mit historisch-kritischem Kommentar*, II (Haarlem, 1922), 76–77; contra: Sahlgren, pp. 252–55 (also in "Sagan om Frö och Gärd," *Namn oc bygd* 16 [1928], 8–10); *Edda ...*, ed. G. Neckel, II. Kommentierendes Glossar (Heidelberg, 1928), s.v. *qnn*, *ofan-verðr*, *þryngva*; Reichardt, pp. 490–91; Dronke, p. 256.
8. Magnus Olsen, *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*, IV (Oslo, 1957), 173–81.
9. *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, VI, ed. E. Dobbie (New York, 1942), p. 125; the metrical charms are cited from this edition. G. Storms' (*Anglo-Saxon Magic* [The Hague, 1948], pp. 208–10) arrangement of the introduction as verse brings out the balanced syntactical structures and alliteration. Cf. Karl Schneider, "Die strophischen Strukturen und heidnisch-religiösen Elemente der ae. Zauberspruchgruppe 'wið þeofðe'" in *Festschrift ... Theodor Spira*, edd. H. Viebroch and W. Erzgräber (Heidelberg, 1961), pp. 39–40.
10. The most elaborate and recent explanation is that of Schneider, pp. 41–43, in which Garmund is Freyr or Baldr. Schneider's reasoning is too circuitous to be convincing, and he has not really come to terms with the suggestion that *godes ðegen* must indicate a Christian priest (F. P. Magoun, "Zu den ae. Zaubersprüchen," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 171 [1937], 26); on the other hand, a supernatural creature of low order seems to fit the context best.
11. Lines 14–15 are mysterious: "Binnan þrym nihtum cunne ic his mihta, / his mægen and his mihta and his mundcræftas." Storms translates "Within three days I shall know his might, / his force and his protecting powers," dropping the second *mihta* from his text (an emendation adopted by Schneider, p. 43). However, he explains only that "If, in spite of everything, the thief succeeds in carrying them off, he will not escape discovery and punishment: within three days everything about him will be known" (p. 216). Magoun improved on this by interpreting *cunne* (l. 14) as "nicht 'ich werde wissen,' sondern 'möge ich wissen'" [not 'I shall know,' but rather 'may I know']. I would suggest that l. 14 originally read "Binnan þrym nihtum cunne ic his *naman*." This supplies the missing

alliteration (alliteration of the last stressed syllable is found frequently in the charms, cf. 1. 10), does away with the awkward repetition of *mihta*, and is explainable as scribal or oral anticipation of the second *mihta*, perhaps occasioned by the rhyme *nihtum : mihta*. Thus the restored passage would contain all the magically crucial attributes of a man: his innate power (*mægen* and *mihta*), his relation to external powers (*mundcræftas*), and his name.

12. MS reads *syer* for *syre* and *þeo* for *seo*; see Dobbie for these emendations.

13. Cf.: “Ic eom hege gelic ðam ðe hraðe weornaþ, ðonne hit byð amowen” [I am like the grass that rapidly withers when it is mown] (Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *weornian*). Bosworth-Toller’s citations of *weornian* are mostly of plants and, by extension, of people.

14. Cf. *HDA*, s.v. *verdorren*, *vertrocken*, col. 1560–63 and the particularly beautiful example No. 12 in *Folktales of England*, edd. K. Briggs and R. Tongue (Chicago, 1965).

15. See Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *breoðan*; Suppl., s.v. *breoþan*, *breap*; Add. and Corr., s.v. *breap*, *breoþan*, *brepel*, *briþel*; OED, s.v. *brethe*, *brethel*, *brothel*.

16. So Storms’ (p. 141) and others’ (cf. Dobbie’s note) interpretation of *feferfuige and seo reade netele, ðe þurh ærn inwyxð, and wegbrade*; Magoun, p. 19 objects: “Dem Sinn gemäß halte ich diese Deutung aber für höchst unwahrscheinlich, denn der damalige englische Hausbau hätte kaum eine Innenpflanzenkultur begünstigen können. Vielmehr haben wir mit einem selbständigen Beleg des Wortes, das als 2. Element des Kompositums *Rug-ern* ‘Roggenernte, August (?), September (?)’ vorkommt ... und das hier etwa ‘(wachsen des) Getreide’ heissen muss. Das Ganze heisst also: ‘der Biensaug, der durch das Getreide einwächst.’” [I consider this translation very improbable because of its semantic dimension. For English households in those days would hardly have favored the cultivation of house plants. Rather we have to do with an independent attestation of the word which appears as the second element in the compound *Rug-ern* ‘Rye-harvest, August (?), September (?)’ ... and which here then means: ‘the red nettle that grows up among the grain.’] The word *qnn* in *Skm.* 31 supports Magoun’s point.

17. *HDA*, s.v. *Distel*, cols. 301–02, shows that it appears in folklore in various roles, *in bono* [for good] as well as *in malo* [for evil].

18. This argument for the aptness of the thistle simile and what follows below depend on the assumption that the curse is integral to the poem. Finnur Jónsson considered *Skm.* “sá godt som slet ikke interpoleret” [practically free of interpolations] (*Litt. bist.*, p. 178); but Reichardt (pp. 481–85; cf. Felix Niedner, “Skirnir för,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 30 [1886], 149 and Boer, pp. 69–70) has forcefully questioned this, and he has been followed by some influential scholars (Sveinsson, p. 279). To my mind the case for regarding the curse as integral and in some sense “original” is all but proven in Dronke’s learned and elegant essay, and I can only add that the curse comes as Skirnir’s third and most powerful inducement (after bribery and violence), forming a well-known rhetorical pattern in agreement with “epic laws.”

19. St. 27:5–7 contains a comparison, but it is not a magical simile like that of the thistle.

20. The concepts of “syntagmatic” and “paradigmatic” structure are illuminated in J. L. Fischer, “The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales,” *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963), 248–55, with references. A few elements of the curse proper could be assigned to different categories according to our interpretation of them; for example, *geð*, probably meaning ‘lust,’ could belong with *tópi*, *ópi*, and the rest as a mental or even with *morn* as a physical affliction instead of among the facts of sexual life; *morn* itself seems to mean ‘wasting sickness’ and could be regarded as mental or physical as contemporary medical principles might dictate; and *kostr*, here interpreted as ‘food,’ is really polysemous and alludes simultaneously also to Gerðr’s lack of freedom and lack of a proper man (cf. Dronke, n. 5 and Reichardt, p. 490).

21. Cf. Olsen, p. 23: “Det var, maa vi tænke os, den kraftigste trusel, runeris-teren kjendte, mot den kvinde, hvis motstand han vilde bryte.” [It was, we may imagine, the most powerful threat which the rune-carver knew of against a woman whose resistance he wanted to break.]

“*Hárbarðsljóð* as Generic Farce”

Carol Clover

Hárbarðsljóð

More than any other mythological poem in the Edda, *Hárbarðsljóð* has been regarded as problematic in a number of respects. Metrically it ranges through *fornyrðislag*, *ljóðaháttir*, *galdralag*, and sections in what seems to be prose; formally, it consists of a series of apparently unmotivated insults, boasts, threats and untruths exchanged between Óðinn and Þórr. Þórr has come to a fjord and wants to cross; Óðinn, calling himself Hárbarðr, has the ferryboat on the other side and refuses him passage. Þórr apparently initiates the exchange of insults, but Óðinn emerges as the winner and Þórr has to find another way around the watery obstacle. Such hostility between the two gods is not evidenced elsewhere, while many of the incidents mentioned during the course of the poem have no parallels in the rest of the mythological corpus. Scholars in the early part of the century sought to emend or excise the problematic verses, but in recent years critics have endeavoured to provide various explanations for the difficulties the poem offers.

Carol Clover follows earlier scholars in showing the poem to belong to a common medieval genre, known in English as a flyting. In this genre two men or occasionally a man and a woman boast, insult each other, and challenge each other's honour; it is a form attested in Old English, Middle High German and very frequently in Old Norse, where it is generally referred to as a *senna* and shares some characteristics with the *mannjafnaðr*. This is another verbal activity in which the merits of two men are compared, sometimes by the subjects themselves and sometimes by others. (On the differences between the two genres, see Swenson.) The scope for discord in a *senna* or *mannjafnaðr* contest is considerable, given the importance of honour and saving face in Old Norse society.

Clover wrote about the flyting in two articles published close together in time. Clover 1980 places the famously puzzling Unferth episode in *Beowulf* in the context of the Germanic flyting tradition, while the 1979 article reprinted below argues that *Hárbarðsljóð* represents a parody of the flyting form in

which, contrary to the expected outcome, the loser of the competition is the more manly and heroic of the contenders, while the woman-chasing and unheroic Óðinn emerges as the winner; Óðinn displays the verbal skill necessary to win the contest while Þórr flounders. Bax and Padmos (1983) have challenged Clover's reading of the poem as parodic, with an argument drawn from pragmatics and discourse analysis. They find that the pattern of the verbal exchanges in *Hárbarðsljóð* is highly structured and organised and that Þórr understands the rules of the contest just as well Óðinn does. They regard the bulk of the poem (sts. 15–46) as a *mannjafnaðr*, framed by two *sennur* (exchanges of insult), and they suggest that the flyting should be regarded as elaborate rather than parodic. Little other work has been done on the poem; Clunies Ross (1973) discusses the obscure verses 42–47, suggesting that the term 'a ring for the hand' which causes Þórr so much offence may refer to the anus. Santini looks for classical parallels to the poem's situation; finding them in Virgil and Ovid, the most popular classical authors of the medieval period, he suggests that the Old Norse composer of *Hárbarðsljóð* may have known their works.

Carolyn Larrington

Further Reading

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Hárbarðsljóð as Generic Farce

[*Hárbarðsljóð*] ist eine recht plumpe, formlose, absichtlich plebejisch gehaltene

Dichtung, die sich unter den andern Eddaliedern ausnimmt, wie der Thräl unter den Jarlen.

[*Hárbarðsljóð* is a quite clumsy, formless, deliberately vulgar poem, a singular work that stands among the other Eddic poems like a thrall among earls.]

W. v. Wolzogen, *Die Edda*, 1876

Although *Hárbarðsljóð* has long since been manumitted, it has never been fully accepted into the Eddic peerage. From the critics' point of view, the questionable quality is not its flyting or *senna-mannjafnaðr* form (used effectively in the neighboring poems) nor its disrespectful picture of Þórr as physical giant and mental midget (a standard image, realized with particular success in the nearby *Þrymskviða*), but its radical formal disharmony, which has from the outset conditioned literary judgment of the poem. In this respect opinion has not changed much since Finnur Jónsson declared *Hárbarðsljóð* a "forvirret blanding af ligt og uligt, af vers og prosa, af de fineste bemærkninger og de smagløseste flovheder."¹ His solution was to posit a late, tasteless, and metrically illiterate interpolator whom he held responsible for all lines of prose and *ljóðaháttir* (about one-third of the poem) and to construct out of the *málaháttir* remainder a version which could "stilles op ved siden af de smukkeste eddakvad."² The modern view that the text as we have it is both original and relatively old has, however, quelled speculations on a purer forerunner,³ and recent commentators have tended to take the poem as it is, either making a virtue of its vices⁴ or letting it stand as an inexplicable weed in the larger garden of Norse poetry.⁵ It should be said in Finnur Jónsson's defense that he at least recognized that the poem's structure wanted an explanation. This is the point of departure for the following remarks, which argue that there is more to *Hárbarðsljóð* than has met the critical eye—specifically, that certain of its formal irregularities are not entirely random but are schematically linked with the joke, and that the joke, in turn, is not only a comedy on the character of Þórr or a political allegory, in the Hellenic spirit, on the confrontation between landowner and military aristocrat,⁶ but a parody on the tradition of the *senna-mannjafnaðr* itself.

The number of extant examples, the widespread incidence, and the antiquity of the Germanic flyting give us a picture which, it might be argued, is fuller and hence more susceptible of generic description than even the well-publicized Germanic heroic lay.⁷ The flyting may be loosely defined as a stylized exchange between hostile speakers of traditional provocations (insults, boasts, threats, and curses), typically organized in the basic pattern Claim, Denial, and Counterclaim.⁸ It is not, strictly speaking, a type-scene of Oral Theory⁹ but a set piece drawing on a common stock of clichés which are sufficiently genre-specific to identify the nature of the exchange despite considerable variation in matters of length, elaborateness, mode (prose or poetry), formal status (dependent or independent),¹⁰ and intention. Because it is a traditional form governed by the usual principle of variation, no single

example stands as an epitome, and examples are seldom sufficiently congruent to constitute analogues or versions in the usual sense.

But if the whole poem has no counterpart, its individual ingredients are abundantly paralleled elsewhere in the corpus. The “sundering flood” setting, for example, is a venerable and widespread tradition,¹¹ represented in the three Helgi poems, *Ketils saga hængs* (chs. 4 and 5), *Gríms saga loðin-kinna* (ch. 1), *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* (ch. 12), *Sverris saga* (ch. 131), Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*,¹² the Norse versions of the “quarrel of the queens” in the Sigurðr tradition (*Völsunga saga* and *Snorra Edda*),¹³ the *Nibelungenlied* (Âventiure 25; see below), *Maldon*, a proto-episode in *Beowulf*,¹⁴ and, in earlier Latin sources, in the anonymous *Liber Historiae Erancorum* (ch. 41) and Widukind’s *Res Gestae Saxonicae*.¹⁵ It is curious that the obviously stereotypical nature of the setting in *Hbl* has not discouraged scholarly efforts to determine its exact geographical location.¹⁶

Hbl shares with most of the over-water flytings a dramatic situation which pits a traveling hero against a “quarrelsome coastguard” who acts as territorial warden. An unusually close analogue in this respect is Âventiure 25 of the *Nibelungenlied*:¹⁷ in both accounts a traveling hero (Þórr; Hagen) solicits passage from an intransigent ferryman (Hárbarðr; the *verge* [ferryman]); there is shouting over the water (an unnamed *sund* [sound]; the Danube); the traveler offers a reward (Þórr offers Hárbarðr breakfast from his knapsack; Hagen offers the *verge* a gold ring from the tip of his sword); the ferryman is in the service of another man (Hildólfr; Gelfrât) and refuses, on grounds of his employer’s instructions, to grant passage; there is some question of status indignity (Hárbarðr being Óðinn, Þórr’s unrecognized father; the *verge* being ‘of such standing that it is unfit for him to render services’);¹⁸ one of the contenders has assumed a false name (óðinn: Hárbarðr; Hagen: Amelrîch), thereby deluding the other into a misapprehension of the situation; and there is, finally, the reference to the ferryman’s marital status (the reference to Sif’s infidelity in st. 48; the *verge* is said to want the ring for his bride).¹⁹ The comparison is a cogent demonstration of the *Hbl* poet’s literary conservatism. The occurrence of a “ferocious-ferryman” flyting at the Norse and Austrian extremities of Germanic literature suggests both antiquity and currency, and we may fairly assume that its dramatic situation had the force of a cliché even to an early audience.

The identification (“segðu til nafns þíns” [tell me your name, st. 8], “segja mun ec til nafns míns” [I’d tell my name, st. 9], etc.) is a virtually universal feature of the flyting and is too familiar to require examples.²⁰ The matching of personal histories and the blend of boast and insult are equally characteristic, best represented in *Magnússona saga*, *Qrvar-Odds saga* (ch. 27), *Maldon*, *Beowulf* (the Unferð episode), and the Helgi lays. The imputations of unmanliness and sexual oddity (e.g., “Hárbarðr inn ragi” [the pervert, sts. 27, 51] and the breeches insult in st. 6; see note 34 below) as well as curses and threats of violence (“ec mynda þic í hel drepa,” etc. [I would knock you into

hell, st. 27]) are likewise a virtual *sine qua non* of the genre. Syntactic symmetry and verbal repetitions (e.g., *Hbl* sts. 1–3, 19–20, 23–24, 29–30) are defining characteristics of the form, and the use of a repeated challenge formula plus name (“hvát vanntu Þá meðan, Þórr?” [What were you doing meanwhile, sts. 15, 18, etc.]) has conspicuous parallels in *Lokasenna* (“Þegi Þú, Heimdallr” [Shut up, Heimdallr, st. 48]), *Bandamanna saga* (“Þar sitr Þú, Járnskeggi” [There you sit, Járnskeggi]), and *Qrvar-Odds saga* (“Sjólfr, vart eigi þar” [Sjólfr, you were not there]).

This tally of correspondences—it may be argued that *Hbl* is in fact hypertypical—leaves no doubt as to the author’s mastery of the tradition. When he therefore distorts the conventions, we may assume that he does so intentionally and, presumably, for comic effect. There are two major features or norms which are consistently distorted in *Hbl*. One has to do with the verbal skill of the contenders and the other has to do with what will be called the hard life/soft life opposition. Because these are central to the analysis, it is necessary to review in some detail their normal expression in the wider corpus.

The flyting, like its near relative the wisdom dialogue, is conceived as a *certamen vocis* [oral contest], with its own rules and its own winners and losers. The equation between physical and verbal combat, with language equivalent to ammunition, is the working metaphor of the flyting, expressed in such speech figures as *orðum bregðask* [battle with words] in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1*, *sakask sáryrðom* [fight with wound-words] in *Lokasenna*, *onbindan beadurune* [unleash war-words] in *Beowulf* (v. 501a), and, conversely, in such kennings for battle as *sverða senna* [quarrel of swords], etc. It comes as no surprise, then, that the chief attribute of flyting contenders is eloquence. Of *Sinfjötli* (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1*) it is said that he “s vara kunni / oc við qðlinga / orðom scripta” [knew how to answer and to converse with kings]. Saxo’s flyting master is Ericus Disertus (Eiríkr inn málspaki, Eric the Eloquent), described as a man ‘better spoken than all other people,’ ‘superior in words,’ ‘stronger in tongue,’ and ‘champion in argument’ (*altercationum athleta*).²¹ His opponent Grep is also well spoken, but his eloquence is ‘not so much excellent as impudent, for he surpassed all in tenacity of speech’ (Saxo 5). The *Pyle Unferþ*’s forensic talents are self-evident, and his keen wit is acknowledged by *Beowulf* himself (v. 589b); Loki, in *Lokasenna*, is “auðigr ... í andsvorum” [rich in rejoinders, st. 5]; Ófeigr, the flyting artist of *Bandamanna saga*, is characterized at the outset as “spekingr mikill ok ráðagørðar maðr” (both epithets suggesting verbal skill in the saga idiom); and King Sigurðr is acknowledged to be the “sléttorðari” [more fluent of speech] in the *Magnússona saga* flyting. It should be stressed that eloquence is as much an attribute of losers (Grep, Unferþ, King Sigurðr, etc.) as it is of winners, presumably on the dramatic principle that combat between unequals, whether physical or verbal, is bad theater.²²

At the heart of the flyting lies the opposition between the hard and the soft

life. The hard life consists of traveling, adventuring, and above all fighting for one cause or another; the soft life consists of such inferior alternatives as being a ‘home-dragger’ (*heimdragi*), sleeping, talking (as opposed to acting), eating and drinking (especially of overly fine food and drink), and sexual dalliance. Action vs. talk is the thrust of Skarpheðinn’s serial insults to the Alþing chieftains (*Njáls saga*, chs. 119–20), e.g., “er þér meiri nauðsyn at hefna foður þíns en spá mér slíkar spár” [you would be better employed avenging your father than making me prophecies]. Similarly, Guðmundr’s charge in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1* (repeated in variant form in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana 2*):

Væri ycr, Sinfjötli, sömra myclo
gunni at heyia oc glaða orno,
enn sé ónýtom orðom at bregðaz. (St. 45)

[It would better beseem you, Sinfjötli, to give battle and gladden eagles than to fight with useless words.]

The entire *Magnússona saga* flyting (ch. 21) builds on the contrast between adventurer and stay-at-home, and King Sigurðr concludes a litany of his foreign deeds by chiding his brother Eysteinn, who has stayed behind, with the words “ek hygg, at eigi hefir þú enn hleypt heimdraganum” [it seems to me that you still haven’t managed to break away from home (literally ‘stopped home-dragging’)].²³ Likewise, each of the nineteen stanzas of the epic *Qrvar-Odds saga* flyting poses an explicit antithesis between martial action and some form of trivial stay-at-home behavior, e.g.:²⁴

Sigurðr, vart eigi,
er á Sælundi felldak
bræðr böðharða,
Brand ok Agnar,
Ásmund, Ingjald,
Álfr var inn fimmti;
en þú heima látt
í höll konungs,
skrókmálasamr,
skauð hernumin. (St. 13)

[Sigurðr, you weren’t on Zealand when I felled the battle-hard brothers Brandr and Agnar, Ásmundr and Ingjaldr, and Álfr was the fifth— while you were lying at home in the king’s hall, full of tall stories, a captive gelding.]

Þú látt, Sigurðr,
í sal meyja,
meðan við Bjarma
börðumst tvisvar,
háðum hildi
hauksnarliga,
en þú, seggr, í sal
svaft und blæju.” [St. 8]

[You, Sigurðr, were lying in the maidens’ chamber while we twice battled the
Permians. War we waged, hawk-like, while you, hero, slept under linen in the
hall.]

Contempt for amorous play—always contrasted to glorious deeds of arms—is
Oddr’s main theme:

Slótt við meyjjar
málþing, Sjólftr,
meðan loga létum
leika um kunni. ... (St. 7)

[You were chattering with girls, Sjólftr, while we sent the household up in flames.
...]

... knáttak þeira,
áðr þaðan færak,
átján lýða
aldri næma,
en þú gjögraðir,
gárungr vesall,
sið um aftan
til sængr þýjar. (St. 19)

[I succeeded, before leaving from there [Gautland], in taking eighteen men’s lives
—while you, wretched fool, staggered your way late at night to the slave girl’s
bed.]

Sjólftr, vart eigi,
þar er sverð ruðum
hvöss á jarli
fyr Hléseyju;
en þú hallaðist
heima á milli,
kynmálasamr,
kálfs ok þýjar. (St. 12)

[Sjólftr, you weren’t there when we reddened our sharp swords on the earl off
Læsø—while you, lascivious talker, were at home wavering between the calf and
the slave girl.]

Likewise Guðmundr’s claim to *Sinfjötli* in *HHI*:

Pér mun Hqðbroddr Helga finna,
flugtrauðan gram, í flota miðiom,
sá er opt hefir qrno sadda,
meðan þú á qvernom kystir þýjar. (St. 35)

[There Hqðbroddr will find Helgi, flight-scorning prince, in the middle of the
fleet; he has often sated the eagles, while you were at the mill kissing slave girls.]

The examples can be multiplied. It is a rare flyting between men that does not pit the active life against domestic pastimes—as Oddr sums it up, “Sigr hafða ek, / sazt kyrr meðan” [I had victory while you were sitting still]. The presence of the same opposition in the Unferþ episode in *Beowulf*, complete with the characteristic sarcasm about unmanly activities, guarantees its antiquity in Germanic tradition. Nor is there any question as to the general bias, which consistently and unambiguously favors martial heroism over all other activities, and charges of this sort give the upper hand to such patent heroes as Beowulf, Qrvar-Oddr, and Skarpheðinn.²⁵ That home-staying, sexual frivolities, talking, eating, and drinking are equivalently inferior alternatives is evident in such flytings as Qrvar-Oddr’s, in which the stylized format results in a clear set of plus and minus equations. The prejudice is further borne out in the grandiloquent formulations of that self-styled and irascible moral arbiter of early Scandinavian letters, Starkaðr the Old, whose earlier life was spent as an ascetic and mobile warrior in pursuit of traditional heroic honor, and whose later life was devoted to the wholesale castigation of a new generation of decadent and effeminate men who stayed at home and languished in the trivial pleasures of food, wine, conversation, women, and soft beds.²⁶

* * *

Hárbarðsljóð falls into three distinct sections: a preliminary section (sts. 1–13), a central exchange or flyting proper (sts. 14–54), and a conclusion (sts. 55–60). Magnus Olsen has compared its outer structure to that of the *drápa*: “after en innledning kommer rekken av stefjabalkar, adskilte ved *stef*’et ... og *slæmr* danner slutningspartiet.”²⁷ The flyting proper is commonly said to reflect, albeit badly in its present form, a proto-scheme of 2 x 5 stanzas marked off by the challenge formula *hvat vanntu Þá meðan* [‘what did you do meanwhile’].²⁸ If the internal structure of the poem is chaotic, the outer design is by Eddic standards bold and clear.

The preliminary section opens with the usual shouting of belligerent questions over the sound.²⁹ Þórr asks the ferryman to take him across (sts. 3–4), offering as payment some food from his knapsack (possibly a comic inversion of a more traditional and appropriate offer of gold)³⁰ and reciting in detail what he himself ate for breakfast that morning.³¹ The ferryman (st. 4) responds ironically (“Árligom vercom / hrósar Þú verðinom” [‘How proud you are of your morning deeds!’]) and goes on to inform Þórr that his mother is dead (“dauð hygg ec at Þín móðir sé”).³² This unexpected morbidity produces a response in Þórr which is neither poetic nor complete: he merely records his distress, a fact which has led to the positing of lost lines.³³ The ferryman goes on to accuse him of looking like a beggar (a familiar flyting insult)³⁴ and, declaring reluctance to do business with robbers and horse-thieves, asks Þórr to identify himself. Þórr does so stolidly (st. 9) and requests

the ferryman to do likewise. The ferryman's answer sets the tone for the rest of the piece: after giving a patent pseudonym, he declares in mock piety "hyle urn nafn sialdan" [seldom do I hide my name]. Þórr, sensing the taunting tones in Hárbarðr's following words (st. 12), declares that if he did not fear the effect of the cold currents on his private parts, he would surely cross the sound and attack Hárbarðr,³⁵ to which Hárbarðr replies that he will simply wait, adding, "fanntaðu mann inn harðara / at Hrungni dauðan" [you have encountered no fiercer man since the death of Hrungnir]. With this baiting allusion to a specific past event, Hárbarðr provokes Þórr into a full-fledged flyting response:

Hins viltu nú geta, er við Hrungnir deildom,
sá inn stórúðgi iotunn, er ór steini var hǫfuðit á;
Þó lét ec hann falla oc fyrir hníga.
Hvat vanntu þá meðan, Hárbarðr? (St. 15)

[You refer to my fight with Hrungnir, that haughty giant with the head of stone; I brought him down, made him sink before me. What did you do meanwhile, Hárbarðr?]

Þórr's stanza is in perfect *mannjafnaðr* form: he dilates on the Hrungnir episode, aggrandizes his own role in it, generates a conventional challenge formula, and waits for an equivalent response. Hárbarðr answers:

Var ee með Fjölvari fimm vetr alla,
í ey þeiri, er Algrún heitir;
vega vér þar knáttom oc val fella,
margs at freista, mans at kosta. (St. 16)

[I was with Fjölvarr five winters, on that island which is called Algræn; there we did battle, wreaked slaughter, ventured many a deed, and tried out the slave girls.]

The first seven half-lines are in flyting terms pedestrian enough, but the eighth, with its gratuitous sexual revelation, is unprecedented. If Hárbarðr has deliberately tried to throw his adversary off balance, he succeeds. Forgetting the rest of Hárbarðr's stanza, and indeed the very flyting which he himself lately initiated in such booming terms, Þórr fixes on just those last three words. His bewilderment, mixed perhaps with a certain degree of prurient interest, is palpable:

Hverso snúnoðo yðr konor yðrar? (St. 17)

[How did you get your women?]

With this lame rejoinder the form collapses. What the audience expects is not a single line, but a full stanza; not a question (the form precludes ingenuous questions) but a declarative statement (Denial and Counterclaim); and, of course, poetry and not prose. But Hárbarðr reestablishes at least a poetic

format in his *galdralag* reply:³⁶

Sparcar átto vér konor, ef oss at spǫcum yrði,
horscar átto vér konor, ef oss hollar væri;
Þær ór sandi síma undo
oc ór dali diúpom
grund um grófo;
varð ec þeim einn ǫllum efri at ráðom,
hvílda ec hiá þeim systrom siau,
oc hafða ec geð þeira alt oc gaman.
Hvað vanntu þá meðan, Þórr? (St. 18)

[We had lively women, wise to us; we had intelligent women, generous to us. They wound ropes out of sand and the bottom from the deepest valley. I alone prevailed over all of them; I slept by the seven sisters and got from them full satisfaction and pleasure. What did you do meanwhile, Þórr?]³⁷

In an ironic imitation of the Hrungnir stanza, Hárbarðr expands on what is presented as a historical incident, boasts of his prowess in martial terms (“varð ec þeim einn ǫllum / efri at ráðom”),³⁸ affixes the challenge formula, and waits for an answer. But the humor lies in the incongruity between the tone and the event: this is behavior which in another flyting would be exposed by the opposition as a point of shame is here treated as a point of pride. Not only does Hárbarðr not suppress it, he volunteers it; not only does he volunteer it, he offers it as an accomplishment equivalent to the slaying of Hrungnir. The opposition is traditional, but the bias is exactly reversed. This stanza and others like it amount to generic heresy—a feature of Hárbarðr’s performance which has not been sufficiently appreciated.

But Þórr, constitutionally oblivious to irony, is unaware that the genre has been upended. His reaction to Hárbarðr’s mocking repetition of *hvat vanntu þá meðan?* is automatic and literal, and he forges ahead with yet another tale of giant killing:

Ec drap þjazi, inn þrúðmóðga iǫtun,
upp ec varp augom Allvalda sonar
á þann inn heiða himin;
þau ero merki mest minna verca,
þau er allir menn síðan um sé.
Hvat vanntu meðan, Hárbarðr? (St. 19)

[I killed Þjazi, the fierce giant, and I hurled the eyes of Allvaldi’s son into the bright sky; these are the greatest marks of my deeds, which all men can see henceforward. What did you do meanwhile, Hárbarðr?]

Hárbarðr counters with another unorthodox episode:

Miclar manvélar ec hafða við myrcriddor,
þá er ec vélta þær frá verom;
harðan iǫtun ec hugða Hlébarð vera,
gaf hann mér gambantein,

[Great love-wiles I had with those night-riders, those whom I lured from their husbands; I think Hlébarðr a fierce giant: he gave me his wand, and I drove him out of his wits.]

To which Þórr responds:

Illom huga launaðir þú þá góðar gíafar. (St. 21)

[You repaid good gifts with an evil mind.]

Again Hárbarðr has produced a boast lacking the challenge formula on which Þórr's ability to generate a full stanza so utterly depends, and again Þórr is reduced to a fragmentary response, in prose, not to the stanza as a whole but only to the final lines (where the formula ought to be).

This pattern recurs throughout the flyting proper. The formula *Hvat vanntu þá meðan?* occurs nine times, five times spoken by Þórr and four times by Hárbarðr. To each of Hárbarðr's citations Þórr responds with a stereotypical boast stanza of roughly the same form and dimensions as stanzas 15 (on Hrungnir) and 18 (on Þjazi) cited above: stanza 23 recounts a battle against giant women; stanza 29 recounts a battle against the sons of Svárangr; stanzas 37/39 (stanza 38 is an interruption) recount a battle against berserk women of Hlésey. Þórr's response to the challenge formula is perfectly conditioned: at every one of Hárbarðr's citations he automatically embarks on a long stanza beginning "ec drap" [I killed] or "ec var austr" [I was east]; it is only in response to the challenge formula that he generates such boast stanzas—or, with the exception of st. 47, full stanzas at all. His ability to perform his role in the flyting thus appears to be entirely contingent on his opponent's adherence to established format. Hárbarðr's failure to provide the necessary formula at the expected moment robs Þórr of a real reply and reduces him to fragmentary threats of violence or expressions of confusion or rage.

On the other hand, Hárbarðr's responses to the challenge formulas are—their boastful tone notwithstanding—radically unconventional. Three have erotic topics (sts. 18, 20, 30), and two (sts. 24 and 40) appear to be allusions to Óðinn's associations with death.³⁹ As for form, only the first (st. 18) follows the normal recipe. Of the remainder (sts. 20, 24, 30, and 40), none uses the challenge formula (and one is a half-stanza). In other words, Hárbarðr does not use the challenge formula, as convention requires, at the end of the stanza as a pivotal device: twice (sts. 22 and 28) it is linked with fragmentary stanzas (one an ironic one-line proverb) and once it appears as a single speech line (st. 36). It is particularly this last occurrence that points up the gratuitous and baiting nature of Hárbarðr's performance.

From this emerges a consistent structural logic. The flyting proper up to st. 42 (after which both the form and the argument degenerate) consists of five four-stanza "sequences" (14–17, 18–21, 22–25, 28–31, and 36–41), all of

which conform to the same rhetorical and formal scheme. The first stanza of each sequence (14, 18, 22, 28, 36) is spoken by Hárbarðr and includes the challenge formula.⁴⁰ The second stanza of each sequence (15, 19, 23, 29, and 37/39)⁴¹ is spoken by Þórr and consists of a lengthy boast stanza capped with a challenge formula. The third stanza of each sequence (16, 20, 24, 30, and 40) is spoken by Hárbarðr and consists of a pseudo-boast (on an incorrect topic) *without* a challenge formula. The fourth stanza of each sequence (17, 21, 25, 31, 41) is spoken by Þórr and consists of a single prose line (in the case of stanza 25, a faulty poetic line). Thus:

Stanza	Speaker	No. Lines/ Formula	Form	Content	
14	Hárbarðr	4 (see note 44)	verse	flyting challenge	
15	Þórr	6 + formula	verse	boast (Hrungnir)	
16	Hárbarðr	8		verse	pseudo-boast
17	Þórr	1		prose	-----
18	Hárbarðr	12 + formula	verse	pseudo-boast	
19	Þórr	8 + formula	verse	boast (Þjazi)	
20	Hárbarðr	7		verse	pseudo-boast
21	Þórr	1		prose	
22	Hárbarðr	2 + formula	verse	ironic proverb	
23	Þórr	8 + formula	verse	boast (giants)	
24	Hárbarðr	7		verse	pseudo-boast
25	Þórr	3		(prose)	
28	Hárbarðr	2 + formula	verse	“echo” question	
29	Þórr	8 + formula	verse	boast (Svárangr’s sons)	
30	Hárbarðr	6		verse	pseudo-boast
31	Þórr	1		prose	
36	Hárbarðr	formula	(prose)	(formula)	
37/39	Þórr	10 + formula	verse	boast (berserk women)	

40	Hárbarðr	4	verse	pseudo-boast
41	Þórr	1	prose	

It should be added that these five sequences are only the most schematic representations of what appears to be an underlying habit of mind; partial or proto-sequences may also be discerned in sts. 3–5, 9–11, 47–49, and 56– 57. Indeed, if we add to the list of Þórr’s broken replies the similar st. 5 of the preliminary (in which he recoils at the news of his mother’s death; see above) and the equally similar st. 57 of the conclusion (his perplexed response to Hárbarðr’s long set of travel directions),⁴² we have accounted for all six of Þórr’s prose lines.⁴³

It is thus clear that not only the poem’s structural irregularities (the breakdown into prose dialogue and the variation in stanza length) but also its conspicuous regularities (the technically complete boast stanzas) are to a certain extent conditioned by context. The interaction between the speakers is in fact scheduled, and their performances are therefore predictable—Þórr’s largely so, and Hárbarðr’s loosely so. *Hbl* has no large plot to speak of; it works instead on a simple principle of repeated forms, each form constituting a miniature drama in which Þórr is, generically speaking, seduced and abandoned by his ironic adversary. Þórr’s prose or near-prose verses are the punch lines *manqués*, marking the temporary collapse of the form and the end of the individual scenes, and it remains for Hárbarðr to resume the play, either immediately or after some interstitial verbal byplay (e.g., sts. 26–27 and 32–35). To the extent that each sequence or protose- quence is a formal demonstration of the contenders’ cross-purposes—Þórr’s to conduct and Hárbarðr to subvert a traditional flyting—the parodic element may be said to inhere in the structure itself. This analysis does not account for the poem’s third irregularity, the alternation of meters; but we may reasonably suppose, in light of the above, that this is a function of the same parodic impulse—less schematic than the variation in stanza length and the prose/poetry alternation, but equally intended “til forhøjelse af den komiske virkning” [to heighten the comic effect].⁴⁴

Þórr’s intellectual inadequacy with respect to Hárbarðr (and with respect to the generic expectation) is a vein thoroughly mined by the poet. As we have suggested, Þórr’s notion of a flyting entry is confined to doctrinaire and monochromatic boasts of giant-killing. His remaining stanzas in the flyting proper consist of simpleminded threats or accusations (27, 47, 49, 51, 53) or brief expressions of confusion (17, 21, 25, 31, 33, 41, 43). Insults appear to be beyond Þórr’s capability. He has in fact only one, a frayed *ergi* [‘unmanliness’] formula (“Hárbarðr inn ragi”) [you pervert], which he uses twice here (sts. 27 and 51), once in variant form in st. 49 (“hair inn hugblauði”) [cowardly man], and four times in similar form (“Þegi Þú, rǫg vætr”) [Shut up, queer] in *Lokasenna*. (This *idée fixe* of Þórr’s is explicitly

twitted in *Þrymskviða* 17: “Mic munu æsir / argan kalla, / ef ec bindaz læt / brúðar líni” [The Æsir might call me a fag if I let myself be dressed in bridal linen] and probably lies behind the *væta* *ǫgur* concern in *Hbl* 13 as well.) His language blends colloquial with slightly stilted formulations which “smaker av jotunsprog”⁴⁵ and his stanzas are for the most part, and certainly in comparison with Hárbarðr’s, unimaginative.⁴⁶ Given the mediocrity of his performance as a whole, it is hard suppose that the *Hvat vanntu Þá meðan?* that he supplies as a challenge formula was not also intended by the poet to be ludicrously conventional.

Hárbarðr, on the other hand, deploys a full range of provocations. He relies heavily on sarcasm and insults, both general and specific: st. 26 recalls Þórr’s ignominious night in Fjalarr’s (Skrymir’s) glove: “hvárki Þú Þá Þorðir / fyr hræzlo Þinni / hníða né físa, / svá at Fialarr heyrði” [you dared neither sneeze nor fart for fear that Fjalarr would hear]; st. 6 denigrates his appearance; and st. 24 makes the pointed claim that “Óðinn á iarla, / Þá er í val falla, / en Þórr á Þræla kyn” [Óðinn gets the earls who fall in battle, but Þórr gets the slaves]—a remark to which partisans of the socio-mythic interpretation attach special significance.⁴⁷ He makes two taunts about Þórr’s domestic life: that his mother is dead (st. 4) and that his wife Sif has a lover (st. 48). His language is equally varied, ranging from elegant irony to a style “preget av lav jargon” (in sharp contrast to Þórr’s efforts at ceremony).⁴⁸ His stanzas are marked by ornamental peculiarities (doubled lines, extra alliteration, internal rhyme) and make rich use of metaphors, proverbs, wordplay, allusions, and oblique formulations. But his chief strategy, used repeatedly throughout the poem, is the “gækkende ekko” [mocking echo] introduced in the opening exchange:⁴⁹

Þórr:	Hverr er sá sveinn sveina, er stendr fyr sundit handan?
Hárbarðr:	Hverr er sá karl karla, er kallar um vágin? ⁵⁰

Just as firing back the enemy’s own spear or arrow is a choice effrontery in actual combat, so Hárbarðr’s witty returns of Þórr’s lines have a special insult value. His st. 28, “Hvat scyldir Þú um sund seilaz, / er sakir ro allz ǫngar?” [Why should you want to get over the sound if we have no quarrel?] is a mocking repetition of Þórr’s puzzled question (st. 11), “Hvat scaltu of nafn hylia, / nema Þú sacar eigir?” [Why should you want to hide your name, if we have no quarrel?].⁵¹ To Þórr’s “Ec mynda Þér þat veita, / ef ec viðr of kœmiz” [I would help you if I could get there], Hárbarðr replies (st. 34), “Ec mynda Þér Þá trúa, / nema Þú mic í trygð véltir” [I would believe you if you hadn’t tricked me]. In st. 36 Hárbarðr asks, “Hvat vanntu meðan, Þórr?” (the eighth repetition of the formula) and then interrupts Þórr’s response (a description of his battle with berserk women) with the sarcastic comment “Klæki vanntu Þá,

Þórr, / er Þú á konom barðir” [Shame you won, Þórr, in fighting with women]. But it is in the erotic stanzas that the technique is most elegantly realized. To Þórr’s account of his victory over the sons of Svárrangr (st. 29) Hárbarðr responds:

Ec var austr oc við einhveria (A: einherio) dæmðac,
léc ec við ina línhvito oc launþing háðac,
gladdac ina gullþqrto, gamni mærunði.⁵² (St. 30)

[I was east, chatting with some woman (A: battle maiden); I rallied with the linen-white one and waged secret meetings; I gladdened the gold-bright one—the maid enjoyed her pleasure.]

Not only is his first line a direct imitation of Þórr’s preceding first line (“Ec var austr / oc ána varðac”; ‘I was east, guarding the river’), his choice of words throughout mimics his conventional language of struggle and conquest (*léc*: cf. *leika við e-n* or *Hildar leikr*; *h áða launþing*: cf. *heyja sverðþing*; *gladdac*: cf. *gleðja Hugin* or *glaða Qrno*).⁵³ This may be the *Edda*’s wittiest stanza.

Quips and insults form a minor genre in Norse, and the ability to improvise them—or anything else—was by all accounts a highly prized skill. This is Hárbarðr’s great advantage: he is able to adjust and react spontaneously to whatever formulations Þórr may utter, whereas Þórr is entirely dependent for his material on the mechanical formulas of a tradition he has not quite mastered. On the verbal as well as the structural level, Þórr plays off the convention, while Hárbarðr plays off Þórr.⁵⁴

Lokasenna 57–63 offers a partial but close parallel—so close, in fact, that it led an earlier generation of scholars to identify Hárbarðr with Loki.⁵⁵ Into Loki’s encounter with the gods Þórr makes an eleventh-hour entry and, taking up the established form and phrasing with characteristic literal-mindedness, offers four stanzas, of which the first helming of each is “Þegi Þú, rǫg vættr / Þér seal minn Þrúðhamarr, / Miðllnir, mál fyrnema” [Shut up, queer, or my mighty hammer Mjðllnir will close your mouth], and the second helming a simple threat of violence expressed in boastful terms (e.g., “hendi inni hægri / drep ec þic Hrungrnis bana, / svá at Þér brot-nar beina hvat”; ‘with my right hand I will kill you with Hrungrnir’s bane and break your bones’). In contrast, Loki is intellectually nimble and manages to fit into the interstices of his opponent’s lumbering threats an ominous reminder of Þórr’s scheduled fate at Ragnarök (st. 58), two verbally similar insults on the Skrymir’s glove incident (sts. 60 and 62), a sarcasm about his own intention of staying alive (62), a summary statement (sts. 64–65), and what appears to be a curse (st. 65).⁵⁶ The relation Loki-Þórr thus duplicates the relation Hárbarðr-Þórr. Loki insults, curses, cajoles, and ironizes, whereas Þórr only threatens and boasts. Loki’s formulations are flexible and multi-toned; Þórr’s are rigid. Loki improvises; Þórr relies on formulas. Þórr is, of course, not the only loser in *Lokasenna*; he is preceded by fifteen speakers who have also been verbally worsted by Loki.

But his performance is nonetheless uniquely stupid in the poem. Loki's other opponents may be ineffective against him, but they are, with the exception of Byggvir, by no means without forensic talent, and one senses no major intellectual discrepancy.⁵⁷ Þórr alone, standing in final position, is ridiculously inept, and a large part of the poem's irony rests on the fact that a specifically verbal form is finally "won" by the most inarticulate participant, if only by virtue of his looming presence. Despite its dependent status and its different outcome (there is no body of water to keep Þórr at a safe distance), *Lks* 57–65 is sufficiently like *Hbl* for us to regard it as a short version, probably the prototype, of the same joke.⁵⁸ This similarity, not to speak of the likelihood of a direct relationship, between *Lks* and *Hbl* casts some doubt on the customary analysis of the latter as a sociopolitical allegory promoting the values of the warrior élite at the comic expense of the landholding classes. Loki, Hárbarðr's duplicate in an almost identical drama, can hardly be interpreted as a representative of the martial aristocracy, and there is no way that what is commonly cited as the key sentence of *Hbl* ("óðinn gets the earls who fall in battle, but Þórr gets the slaves") can be stretched to fit *Lokasenna*. To the extent that social class is implicated in *Hbl*, therefore, it is probably best regarded as an embellishment or secondary accretion rather than itself the shaping *Tendenz* of the poem.

There can be no doubt about the *Hbl* poet's sophistication and esthetic control; both are amply demonstrated in the superabundance of flying clichés, the allusions and wordplay, the outer *drápa*-like structure of the poem and, on the level of internal form, the periodic inclusion of entirely regular and generically conventional stanzas. (It should be noted that if *Hbl* is otherwise cluttered, it is through no fault of Þórr's; his boast stanzas are model flying entries in all respects but imagination, and had Hárbarðr responded in like wise, *Hbl* would be the *Codex Regius*'s tidiest poem.) All of this leads us to conclude that the poet could have realized the form fully if he had so chosen, and that his failure to do so is a result not of incompetence but intention—a conclusion confirmed by the patterned nature of certain of the irregularities. It is in this combination of the hyper-typical and the deliberately deviant that we detect the parodist's method of observing certain aspects of the form with exaggerated fidelity in order to set the scene for the comic inversion of certain others.

The traditional reading of *Hbl* as a comic portrait of Þórr in the context of a sociomythic confrontation leaves untouched the question of its problematic construction. It is only against its immediate Germanic generic backdrop that *Hbl* gets its third dimension and its formal oddities come into full comic relief. Þórr and Hárbarðr are of less interest as individuals than as actors of appointed roles in a set piece whose normal rules were entirely familiar to an early audience—and whose breaches of the rules were, by the same token, recognizable as such. The full flavor of Þórr's obviously clumsy performance, in other words, lies not only in its contrast with Hárbarðr's skilled one, but in

its contrast with the generic norm, according to which articulateness, not to say eloquence, was understood to be the minimum requirement. The poet has taken a standard image of Þórr and placed it in an equally standard but radically inappropriate context. Hárbarðr's performance is equally inappropriate, but unlike Þórr's it is both deliberate and unruly—a kind of generic sabotage of Þórr's effort. This dialectic between opposing forces is the determining factor in their continuing interaction, and it runs like a red thread through the string of jokes that constitute the poem. What Þórr tries to construct, Hárbarðr effectively dismantles. Þórr wants to play by the rules but can't, and Hárbarðr can but won't. Hárbarðr transcends the genre, whereas Þórr doesn't even rise to its minimal level. Hárbarðr conducts a parody in which Þórr unwittingly plays the role of straight man (as Liliencron noted, "Der beste humor in den Thorsmythen ist es dass ihm selbst der humor entgeht").⁵⁹ From this can be seen the key role of the genre as the poem's shaping abstraction. As the measure of opposite and equally abnormal performances, it is tantamount to an invisible but constant, and authoritative, third presence.

From the point of view of literary history, and particularly in light of the current discussion of Norse genres, the identification of *Hbl* as a generic farce is of some interest. If the original audience knew what made and unmade a flyting, then "flyting" must have been well entrenched as a literary concept—not only a "felt" concept, but a defined and self-consciously manipulated one (perhaps even a named one).⁶⁰ Although the existence of one such category does not necessarily guarantee the existence of others, it does suggest a denominational habit of mind which may be assumed to extend beyond the immediate case to the larger literary field.

But the real value of this interpretation is that it gives us a new angle on one of the Edda's most recalcitrant poems. It shows how certain structural features which appear at first glance to be random mistakes are in fact deliberate and systematic distortions of the generic norms. Further, it provides a conceptual matrix for the otherwise plotless and static span of sixty stanzas of dialogue. Finally, it explains, more completely and more precisely than other interpretations, the full force of the joke.

Notes

1. Finnur Jónsson, *Hárbarðsljóð: En undersøgelse* (Copenhagen: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1888), p. 173. [Tr.: a confused mixture of like and unlike, of verse and prose, of the most refined observations and the most tasteless vulgarities.]

2. Finnur Jónsson, *Hárbarðsljóð*, pp. 173 and 174–79. [Tr.: take their place beside the most elegant Eddic poems.] Cf. the reconstruction of Felix Niedner, "Das Hárbarðsljóð," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum* 31 (1887): 217–82 (esp. 264–72). Niedner redivided and reattributed the stanzas, reducing the number from sixty stanzas of uneven length to thirty even ones.

3. Magnus Olsen places it around 980. See his *Edda- og Skaldekvad. I. Hárbarðsljóð*,

Avhandlingar utgitt a v det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, 2. Hist.-Filos. Klasse, no. 1 (Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1960), pp. 5–89 (esp. 84–86).

4. See esp. Gerd Weber, *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon* (Zurich: Kindler, 1970–74), s.v. *Hárbarðsljóð*.

5. “[Hbl] zeigt, wie vielgestaltig die altnordische Dichtkunst in ihrer Blütezeit war und daß neben den wohlgepflegten Pflanzen der Skaldik auch manches wilde Gewächs emporgeschossen ist.” [(Hbl) shows how multiform Old Norse poetic art was in its prime and that beside the well-tended plants of skaldic verse, wild undergrowth could also spring up.] Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1964), 1: 58.

6. The classic statement along these lines is that of R. von Liliencron, “Das Harbarðslied,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum* 10 (1856): 180–96. See also Niedner, pp. 228–34. For a dissenting opinion see Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs Historie*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen, G.E.C. Gad, 1920–24), 1: 150.

7. I have used the term “flyting” throughout to refer to any combination of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*. For a list of examples, together with a composite portrait, see my article “The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode,” *Speculum* [55 (1980): 444–68]. See also Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, “Studies on the Function and Context of the *Senna* in Early Germanic Narrative,” Diss. Harvard, 1976; Joseph Harris, “The *senna*: From Description to Literary Theory,” [*Michigan Germanic Studies* 5 (1979): 65–74]; and Joseph Harris, “Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The Evidence of Parallel Passages in the Helgi Poems for Questions of Composition and Performance,” [*Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Haraldrur Bessason and Robert Glendinning (Winnipeg: Manitoba University Press, 1983), pp. 208–240]. See also Andreas Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*, 2nd ed. rev. (Potsdam: Athenaion, 1941), pp. 105–108; Anne Holtsmark in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk mid- delalder fra vikingetid til reformationstid*, s.v. *senna* and *mannjefning*; Paul Herrmann, *Erläuterungen zu den ersten neun Büchern der dänischen Geschichte des Saxo Grammaticus* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1922); Bertha S. Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp. 156–59; and Lars Lönnroth, *Den duhhla scenen: Muntlig diktning från Eddan till Abba* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1977), pp. 53–80.

8. Multiplied forms (e.g., *Lokasenna*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Qrvar-Odds saga*) are a peculiarly Norse development, probably conditioned by the stanza.

9. The distinction is discussed by Joseph Harris in “Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry.”

10. In “Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry” Joseph Harris argues that the shift in meters in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* and certain scribal indications in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* imply recognition of the semi-independent status of the flyting. It stands alone in *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð*, and it is subordinated to a longer context in *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the Helgi poems, and in the sagas.

11. The term comes from Bertha Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 158. Martínez Pizarro delineates the evolution of this scene and its narrative context from Paul the Deacon to the late *fornaldarsögur*. Magnus Olsen (*Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 5) cites such place names as Roparneset, Kallaðarberg, Kallaðarnes, etc.

12. Ericus Disertus vs. Grep (book 5), Ericus Disertus vs. Olmar (book 5), and Knud Lavard vs. Henrik (book 13).

13. On the quarrel of the queens see Alois Wolf, *Gestaltungskerne und Gestaltungsweisen in der altgermanischen Heldendichtung* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1965), esp. 179–96; and Klaus von See, “Die Werbung um Brünhild,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 88 (1957): 1–20.

14. *Viz.* the *landweard* [coastguard] sequence (vv. 229–319 and 1890–95). On the second encounter, “no he mid hearne / of hliðes nosan / gæstas grette” [he did not greet his guests with taunts]—evidently a departure from his usual custom. For an interpretation based on analogues of this “quarrelsome coastguard” cliché see Martínez Pizarro, esp. pp. 76–78.

15. These striking Latin analogues were identified and analyzed by Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, “Studies on the Function and Context of the *Senna*.”

16. Magnus Olsen (*Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 86) suggested “en kystbygd i Hálogaland” [a coastal settlement in Hálogaland]. Knut Bergsland preferred “et sund i en større innsjø innefor kysten” [an inlet in a large lake inland from the coast (in Lappland)] in his “Hárbarðsljóð sett fra øst,” *Maal og Minne* (1967): 8–40. Gösta Holm offers a critical evaluation of Bergsland in “Hárbarðsljóð och Lappland,” *Maal og Minne* (1969): 93–103. See also Anne Holtsmark, “Et gam- melnorsk ordsprog,” *Norveg* 13 (1968): 106–112.

17. G. v. Szczechpanski connected both Hbl and Av. 25 of the Nibelungenlied with the Charon story in *Der romantische Schwindel in der deutschen Mythologie und auf der Qpernbühne. i. Das humoristische altisländische Gedicht von Harbard oder Charon, Fdhrmann wetland in der griechischen Unterwelt* (Elberfeld, 1885), esp. p. 5.

18. Der verge was so riche, daz im niht diencn zam, da von er Ion vil selten von iemen da genam. ouch waren sine knechte vil hohe gemuot.

[The ferryman was of such standing that it was unfitting for him to render services, so that he never accepted payment from anyone, and his underlings, too, were very haughty.]

Text is from Karl Bartsch and Helmut de Boor, *Das Nibelungenlied*, 20th ed. (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1972). Translation is from A. T. Hatto, *The Nibelungenlied* (Penguin, 1976).

19. “Ouch was der selbe verge niulich gehit ... dô wold er verdienen daz Hagenen golt sô rôr” (The ferryman was newly married ... he was hoping to earn Hagen’s gold that shone so red). As de Boor explains (*Das Nibelungenlied*, p. 247, note): “Der Ferge war jung (*niulich*) verheiratet und will den Ring seiner jungen Frau schenken.” [The ferryman was newly married and wants to give the ring to his young wife.] Cf. *Þiðreks saga* (ed. Guðni Jónsson [Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfa-fan, 1962], ch. 365): “þá minntist hann þess, at hann hefir skömmu áðr kvángast ok fengið fagrar konu ok ann mikit ok vill fá henni gull, hvar sem han getr” [then he recalled that he had recently married a beautiful woman whom he loved very much and to whom he wanted to bring whatever gold he got]. Sif, on the other hand, is credited with adultery: “Sif á hó heima, / hans mundo fund vilia, / þann muntu þrec drýgia, / þat er þér scyldara” (Sif has a lover at home; you would be better employed exercising your strength on him).

20. All Eddic citations are from Gustav Neckel, ed., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 1: *Text*. 1914, 4th ed. rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1962). [Additional translations of Eddic quotations are supplied from Carolyne Larrington, tr., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).]

21. Saxo’s Latin is a particularly rich source of such expressions. See esp. book 5 concerning Ericus Disertus.

22. A singular exception is King Fridleif’s verbal assault on a mute adversary (Saxo, book 6).

23. Both this opposition and the emphatic I/you contrast are more completely realized in the *Morkinskinna* version.

24. Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda* (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1959), vol. 2.

25. *Magnússona saga*, which favors the domestic achievements of Eysteinn over the glory-seeking of Sigurðr, is the exception. Snorri has evidently manipulated the tradition for his own political purposes. See Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson’s comments on this in his introduction (p. lvi) to the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of *Heimskringla*, 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1951); also Lönnroth, *Den dubbla scenen*, pp. 69–80.

26. See especially Starkaðr’s display at the court of Ingeld (Saxo, book 6).

27. Magnus Olsen, *Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 19. [Tr.: following the preface comes the row of *steffabalkar* stave sections], each marked by the *stef* (burden) with a *slæmr* (formal conclusion) constituting the final section.]

28. See Magnus Olsen, *Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 19; Felix Niedner, “Das Hárbarðsljóð,”

pp. 249–64; and Finnur Jónsson, *Hárbarðsljóð*, pp. 174–79.

29. Cf. *Eokasenna* 44, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*: 32, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* 12–16, *Ketils saga hængs*, chs. 3, 4, and 5, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, ch. 1, *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, ch. 12, the encounter between Gram/Bessus and Gro (Saxo, Book 1), Ericus Disertus’ various encounters (Saxo, Book 5), and *Njáls saga*, chs. 119–20.

30. As in the *Nibelungenlied* (Äventiure 25) and the *Hildebrandslied*. Martínez Pizarro (“Studies on the Function and Context of the *Senna*,” pp. 87–92) argues for an implicit gold payment in the *Waltharius* (vv. 430–63).

31. “Ferðu mic urn sundit, / fuði ec þic á morgon, / meis hefi ec á baki, / verðra matrinn betri; / át ec í hvíld, / áðr ec heiman fór, / silðr oc hafra, / saðr em ec enn þess.” (“Ferry me over the sound and I’ll feed you in the morning; I have a basket on my back, the food couldn’t be better; I ate a leisurely meal before I left home, of herring and oatmeal, and I’m still full.”) Þórr’s concern with food (cf. *Þrymskviða*) is no doubt a comic touch. As Gerd Weber (*KLL*) put it, “Im anschließenden Wortwechsel klingt das Kriegerethos der Scheltreden in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* an: Þórr denkt morgens zuerst ans Essen, ein Held dagegen—ist damit gemeint—denkt nur an Ruhm.” [In the ensuing verbal exchange resonates the warrior ethos of the *senna* in *HHI* (sts. 32–46); the first thing in the morning that Þórr thinks of is food, whereas a hero (it is implied) thinks only of fame.] For a discussion of the menu, see O. Nordsgaard, “Tors frokost,” *Maal og Minne* 9 (1917): 79–80; in reply, Halvdan Koht, “Sild og —bukker?” *Maal og Minne* 9 (1917): 163–64; in counter-reply, O. Nordsgaard, “Mere om Tors frokost,” *Maal og Minne* 10 (1918): 82–84.

32. F. Detter and R. Heinzel read the remark as a reference to Þórr’s appearance: “Deinem Hauswesen fehlt die weibliche Hand, deine Mutter muss wol schon gestorben sein.” [Your household lacks a feminine touch; your mother must have died.] See their *Sæmundar Edda* (Leipzig: Georg Wigand, 1903), 1: 213. Magnus Olsen (*Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 8) notes the parallel with *Hávamál* 81 (“At qveldi seal dag leyfa, / kono, er brend er” [At evening should the day be praised, the woman when she is cremated]): “Mon det er Hávamálstrofen—latent i dikterens sinn—som har trukket efter sig den videre utmaling av det triste hjem og morens død?” [Could the line from *Hávamál*, latent in the poet’s mind, have shaped this further description of the sad home and the mother’s death?] But Hárbarðr has already proved his capacity for lying and there is, as Niedner pointed out (“Das Hárbarðsljóð,” p. 277), no reason to believe that this remark (or his later one on Sif’s infidelity) is true.

33. Svend Gruntvig, *Scemundar Edda bins fróða*, rev. ed. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1874), p. 201.

34. “Berbeinn þú stendr, / oc hefir brautinga gervi, / þatki, at þú hafir brúcr þínar.” [Barelegged you stand, dressed like a beggar, not even in real breeches (st. 6)]. Appearance insults are commonplace in the flytings; for similar “beggar” examples see *Qrvar-Odds saga*, ch. 27, sts. 2 and 5. With the “breeches” comment Hárbarðr is suggesting that Þórr is not “utstyrt som et mannfolk skal være” [dressed as a man should be] (Magnus Olsen, *Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 9). Martínez Pizarro (“Studies on the Function and Context of the *Senna*,” pp. 36–42) has located a similar breeches insult in an early *senna* context in the *Historia Langobardorum* (5: 38) which implies some sort of sexual irregularity, possibly castration.

35. “Harm liótan mér þicir í því, / at vaða um vágin til þín / oc væta þgur minn” (“It would seem odious to me to have to wade the water and get my balls [?] wet” [st. 13]). On this passage see Magnus Olsen, *Edda- og Skaldekvad*, pp. 17–18, and Jöran Sahlgren, “Væta þgur, Arsvätan och Ballblötan,” *Namn och bygd* 49 (1961): 1–8.

36. Magnus Olsen comments on the metrical peculiarities of this stanza in *Edda- og Skaldekvad*, pp. 21 and 80–84. See also note 50 below.

37. The language of this stanza is intentionally obscure, and its meaning is disputed. The sense of the first helming is: “When these women were to be gentle with us, they were stubborn instead; when they were to be loving to us, they were refractory—from Oskar Lundberg, “Ön Allgrön. Är Eddans Harbardsljod ett norskt kväde?” *Arctos Svecica*, 2 (Stockholm: H. Geber, 1944), p. 30. See also Albert Morey Sturtevant, “A Note on

Hárbarðsljóð,” *Scandinavian Studies* 1 (1913): 157–64. On vv. 5–8, see “Tasks contrary to the laws of nature” in Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk Literature*, FF Communications No. 108 (Helsinki, 1934).

38. Cf. *Áttamál* 53: “átíán, áðr fello, / efri þeir urðo” [eighteen, before they fell, they had overcome].

39. Hárbarðr’s stanzas 24 and 40 are often characterized in the commentaries as straightforward martial boasts equivalent to Þórr’s entries, but closer inspection shows them to be very different. St. 24 begins “Var ec á Vallandi / oc vígom fylgðag” [I was in Valland, and I waged war] but goes on to describe Óðinn’s role not as a participant but as a spectator. St. 40 (“Ec varc í her- nom ...”) [I was in the army] is on first glance a battle description, but as Magnus Olsen wrote, “Vi må spørre: er Harbård nu plutselig blitt aktivt krigersk? Han har jo alt gitt en uttømmende beretning om sin virksomhet når han “vígum fylgði” (24), så her kan intet være a tilføie.” [We may ask, has Hárbarðr turned into an active warrior all of a sudden? He has already detailed what effect he has when he ‘wages war’” (st. 24), so there should be nothing to add here.] He proposes that ‘army’ here refers to *hauga herr*, an army of the dead (*Edda- og Skaldekvad*, pp. 63–67). This reading offers a better motivation for Þórr’s otherwise mysterious response: “Þess viltu nú geta, er Þú fórt oss ólubann (A: olyfā) at biðða.” [This is tantamount to saying that you want to wage war upon us (st. 41).] (Hárbarðr’s Charon-like role should be recalled in this connection.)

40. St. 14 lacks a challenge formula, but Hárbarðr’s reference to Hrungrnir plays the equivalent role, eliciting a formulaic *mannjafnaðr* response.

41. Sts. 37 and 39 are counted as one. Hárbarðr’s single-line st. 38 is an obvious interruption, for Þórr has not completed his boast.

42. On this see Magnus Olsen, “Deildevers,” *Maal og Minne* 23 (1931): 151–53.

43. As counted by Finnur Jónsson in “Hárbarðsljóð.” The remaining prose lines, all Hárbarðr’s, are sts. 36, 46, and 48. St. 36 consists of an unadorned “Hvat vanntu meðan, Þórr?” [What were you doing meanwhile, Thor?] and probably ought not be classed as prose; cf. “vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?” [do you want to know more, or not?] in *Völuspá* [sts. 27ff.]. See Felix Niedner, “Das Hárbarðsljóð,” pp. 245–47.

44. Svend Grundtvig’s brief suggestion (*Sæmundar Edda*, p. 200) that the poem’s irregularities somehow contributed to the comic effect is unique in the early commentaries, and it was emphatically rejected by Felix Niedner (“Hárbarðsljóð,” p. 240).

45. Magnus Olsen, *Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 18. [Tr.: smack of giant language.] See also his “Kǫgurbarn og kǫgursveinn,” *Maal og Minne* 32 (1940): 9–16 [repr. in *Fra Norrøn Filologi* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1949), pp. 271–78]. See also Jöran Sahlgren, “Nordiska ordstudier,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 44 (1928): 258–71.

46. The two metrical analyses of *Hárbarðsljóð* are those of Eduard Sievers, “Die Hárbarðsljóð,” *Metrische Studien* 4: 1. Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Klasse der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Leipzig: Teubner, 1918) 35: 132–42, and Hugo Gering, “Zur Eddametrik. I. Hárbarðsljóð,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 50 (1926): 127–44.

47. E.g., Gerd Weber (*KLL*): “Der Standort des Dichters wird in solchen Sätzen klar: hier verspottet ein vom gehobenen Selbstgefühl des kampfgeprobten Wikings, Dichters und weltgewandten Fürstengefolgsmanns erfüllter Anhänger des Odin-Glaubens den bauerlichen Schutzgott, dem jedes Verhältnis zum Geistigen fehlt und der dem ambivalenten Wesen Óðins nicht gewachsen ist.” [In such sentences, the poet’s position becomes clear: here the adherent of the cult of Óðinn—a highly self-confident, battle-tested Viking, poet, and worldly-wise royal retainer—mocks the patron god of the rustic, who lacks any connection with the spiritual and is untouched by the ambivalent nature of Óðinn.] Magnus Olsen has noted the possibility of wordplay in the line: “Tor må ha ventet at det skulde hete: ’en Þórr á karla [rimende med jarla] kyn,” men han er blitt narret” (*Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 33). [Thor may have been expecting (Hárbarðr) to say: ‘but Þórr has the race of *churls* [or freemen]’ (rhyming with earls), but he is fooled.]

48. Magnus Olsen, *Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 18. [Tr.: marked by low slang.]
49. Finnur Jónsson, *Litt. Hist.*, p. 151.
50. Magnus Olsen argues that Hárbarðr echoes sounds as well as words and phrases. E.g., verse 2 “hermer og overdriver til fulstendig lydming” [mimics and exaggerates with repeated echoes] the *a* sound of the final *handan* in verse 1 (*Edda- og Skaldekvad*, p. 80).
51. The A reading of st. 28 makes the echo even clearer: “Hvat scaltu um sund seilaz, / er sacar ero allz qngar?”
52. Magnus Olsen (*Edda- og Skaldekvad*, pp. 38–46) prefers the A reading *einherio* in light of the larger double entendre. Finnur Jónsson translates *einherja* as “spøgefuld betegnelse for en elskerinde” [jocular term for a lover] (*Lexicon Poeticum*).
53. See Magnus Olsen, *Edda- og Skaldekvad*, pp. 38–46. Cf. also st. 45 of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1*, cited above.
54. Only toward the end of the poem does Þórr appear to comprehend the disparity, if not the full extent of his plight. In st. 43 he despairs: “Hvar namtu þessi / in hnæfiligo orð, / er ec heyrða aldregi / hnæfiligri?” [“Where did you get these insulting words, the most insulting I ever heard?”].
55. So Friedrich Wilhelm Bergmann, *Das Graubartslied (Hárbarðsljóð): Lokis Spottreden auf Thor* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1872); and Viktor Rydberg, *Undersökningar i germansk mytologi*, 1 (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1886). The counter- insurgence was led by Fredrik Sander, *Harbardssången jämte grundtexten till Völuspá. Mythologiska undersökningar med några Eddaillustrationer* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1891); Felix Niedner, “Hárbarðsljóð”; and Finnur Jónsson, “Hárbarðsljóð.”
56. “Eiga þín qll, / er hér inni er, / leiki yfir logi, / oc brenni þér á baki?” (st. 65).
57. Byggvir’s stanzas consist of a boast out of keeping with his social status (st. 45) and an excessive threat (st. 43), making his performance not unlike Þórr’s.
58. The relationship has been examined most closely by Magnus Olsen, *Eddaog Skaldekvad*, passim.
59. Liliencron, “Das Harbardslied,” p. 195. [Tr.: The best joke in this Thor myth is that Thor himself doesn’t get the joke.]
60. Joseph Harris (“The *senna*”) argues that the existence of the term *senna* implies native recognition of a literary category. Cf. my “Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode,” [444–7].

“Þórr’s Fishing Expedition”

[*Hymiskviða*]

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen

Translated by Kirsten Williams

Hymiskviða

Hymiskviða is a fusion of at least two narratives that were probably separate originally: the fetching of the brewing cauldron from the giant Hymir, and Þórr’s fishing expedition during which he hooks the Miðgarðsormr or World-Serpent. Towards the end of the poem, reference is made to a third story: the laming of Þórr’s goat and his acquiring of Egill’s two children as compensation. The poem is not well preserved in the manuscript; skaldic verse, Northern picture stones, and Snorri’s account in *Gylfaginning* help to fill in some of the gaps. Possibly composed as a prequel to *Lokasenna* (the poem which follows it in the Codex Regius), its composite nature has led a number of scholars to assign it a relatively late date.

Comparatively little has been written on *Hymiskviða*. In the essay that follows, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen outlines the main areas of critical discussion. Comparative mythologists (Dumézil 1952, Schröder 1955) have traced connections with tales of monster-fights in other mythological systems. In such tales the hero always overcomes and kills the monster, suggesting that perhaps the original Old Norse myth was also a monster-slaying story. However, since the Miðgarðsormr must survive until Ragnarök, at least in the version of the mythological cycle known from *Völuspá* and Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*, the outcome of Þórr’s contest with the monster would have to have been modified before its incorporation into *Hymiskviða* in its present form. Other scholars (Gschwantler 1968; Kabell 1976), working in part from picture stones where pagan and Christian images are often juxtaposed, note the parallel between the World-Serpent and Leviathan, the Biblical sea-monster who in Christian typology represents the devil. Patristic exegetes sometimes interpreted the crucifixion as Christ fishing to catch the devil using the cross as a hook. Satan is tempted to swallow the sinless son of God and

thus to forfeit the souls in his keeping. A parallel can be drawn between Christ as savior from the devil and Þórr as defender of gods and men from giant-kind (such comparisons are implied in a number of contemporary sources; see DuBois, ch. 7).

Harris (1985: 83–4) suggests a context for the poem as a whole within a sub-group of Old Norse myths concerned with journeys to giantland to gain or recover some culturally valuable good. Thus *Hymiskviða* can be read alongside *Þrymskviða*, some of Snorri's narratives, and the skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* as a re-enactment of the gods' continuing subjugation of the giants and the transfer or appropriation of cultural goods from the world of nature to the world of culture, as represented by the worlds of the giants and the gods (Clunies Ross 1989; 1994: 127–8). What remains puzzling in the poem is the relationship of Týr to the giants. Óðinn and his brothers are descended from giants, while Þórr's mother and possibly Loki's father are giants, but it is rare in Old Norse tales of an other-world journey to acknowledge this kinship as explicitly as Hymir's wife (Týr's mother?) does. That the female kin of giants are friendly towards non-giant intruders is a well-known folktale motif, however, as evidenced in many versions of the folktale "Jack and the Beanstalk."

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Bórr's Fishing Expedition

Our knowledge of Scandinavian myths and legends in the Viking Age is largely based on five types of sources, all of which had their roots in oral tales about the pre-Christian ideas of life and the cosmos. From the Viking Age itself we have a number of pictorial representations on stones, as well as some runic inscriptions which refer to the tales—mostly indirectly, but occasionally also directly.¹ From the Middle Ages we have the written records of the Eddic and skaldic poems as well as the prose versions of the tales. The stone pictures are our most important and most certainly authentic material, but they are, on the other hand, often difficult to interpret. The picture is a primitive medium compared to the written word, and it is in reality not intelligible if we do not know the story which it illustrates. This relationship between picture and story is demonstrated by the difficulties we encounter when we attempt to interpret the rock carvings, where the linguistic form is lost; but it is also the case with Viking Age iconography that pictures are incomprehensible when no corresponding later stories survive. The Viking Age pictures thus have to be interpreted in conjunction with the medieval written versions. Hereby the picture gains life and coherence, and, conversely, the historical dimension of the written myth is confirmed. We may see that the myth was current at the time when the stone was carved, and the picture tells us which elements the stone carver thought necessary for conveying the meaning of the story. It was the very limitations of a picture's expressive powers, as opposed to those of a tale, that made it vital that exactly the most important and decisive situations and details were selected, and this is where the pictures help us make the correct interpretation of the written versions.

Skaldic poetry is the source closest to the accounts of the Viking Age itself. Because of the transmission of authors' names and the strictly preserved meters, we may assume that the mythological poems in Snorri's *Edda* are, on the whole, fairly close to the originals. The anonymous Eddic poems are probably another matter. The variations within each theme are here so great that considerable changes must be presumed to have taken place in the course of the tradition. In a couple of cases, one being *Hymiskviða*, we must even assume that new versions were created from older material.² The material furthest away from the Viking Age versions is probably the medieval prose tales, of which Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* is the most important. These are interpretations from or into a situation that is essentially different from the pre-Christian situation in which the pictures were produced. The prose tales are, however, also the versions which are most intelligible to our modern understandings, and we are therefore often obliged to accept these later, medieval interpretations, or at least to use them as our starting point. Snorri's *Edda*, with its comprehensive view of the cosmic chain of events, has, as a result, become the predominant basis for the post-medieval conception of 'Nordic mythology'.

The different source types were spread over a geographical area which

included the Scandinavian countries and the parts of the British Isles in which there were Scandinavian settlements. Their time span covers three to four centuries and includes the introduction of Christianity. From our modern perspective, the material appears comparatively continuous, and it is generally assumed that it pertains to one culture. But considering the span in time and place, we must expect variations, and this is indeed borne out by the surviving material.

The subject under discussion in the rest of this paper is the myth of Þórr's attempt to fish the Miðgarðsormr, or World Serpent, out of the ocean. The tale is known from all the above-mentioned source types, except the runic inscriptions, and it is one of the best substantiated of the pagan Nordic myths. At the same time, it does have its obscure points, the most important of these being whether or not Þórr kills the serpent at the end of the story. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri gave a brief and coherent interpretation of the material to which he had access, while in our day the myth has been subjected to comprehensive and ingenious analyses. These have mostly circumvented Snorri and the other surviving versions by attempting to demonstrate influence from, or connections with, religions other than Scandinavian paganism. The myth has by some been interpreted historically and comparatively as part of Indo-European religious history.³ Others have seen it as a product of the time when the pagan religion was replaced by Christianity, and several scholars have here pointed to the parallel between this myth and the Christian myth of Leviathan, which was already recognized by learned men in the Middle Ages.⁴ I shall not discuss any of these aspects here. My intention is to survey the Scandinavian source material in its transmitted forms: first to establish the constants of the myth prior to Snorri; second to see how Snorri understood the myth and how he incorporated it into the unity of *Gylfaginning*.

In the main, Snorri includes all the elements that occur in the earlier sources, which is not surprising, since he did after all build on the skaldic poems. He also has elements not known to us from skaldic poetry, such as Þórr travelling without his goats and chariot and his feet going through the bottom of the boat. Snorri must therefore have had other sources beside the skaldic poems. Only the Eddic poem *Hymiskviða* has a more extensive account than Snorri's. Its framework is the story of how Þórr and Týr fetched the great beer cauldron from the giant Hymir and the fight between Þórr and the World Serpent is here one of the trials Þórr must undergo before he can bring the cauldron home to the Æsir.⁵

Before the different versions are compared, it is necessary to consider their age and transmission. I will only refer here to generally accepted research results. The dating of Snorri's *Edda* poses no difficulties; it is agreed that it was written around 1220–25. *Hymiskviða* in its present form is probably later. These two texts thus differ from the others in that they were epic and were created in the Middle Ages. This does not of course preclude their containing

older material not found elsewhere. As already mentioned, this is the case with the motif of Þórr's goats, and it is highly likely that both texts build on older poems of the Eddic type. The stone pictures are difficult to date. Only the Altuna stone can be dated with any degree of certainty to the beginning of the eleventh century (von Friesen, 425). The Hørdum stone has been broadly dated by Johannes Brøndsted (102) to between the eighth and the eleventh century; its pagan-mythic motif, however, would most likely place it in the first half of this period, in pagan or early Christian times. The Gosforth stone is from the tenth century (Bailey, 131), and Ardre VIII is thought to be from the eighth (Brøndsted, 95; Lindqvist, 119). The skaldic poems can be dated with some certainty. Bragi's poem, which is presumed to form a part of *Ragnarsdrápa*, must be from the first half of the ninth century and is therefore our earliest certain account of the myth of Þórr.⁶ As Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa* is mentioned in *Laxdæla saga* it may, if one so wishes, be dated to c. 978 (Sveinsson 1934, lix). Finally, the poems of Qlvir *hnúfa*, Gamli *gnæfaðarskáld* and Eysteinn Valdason are traditionally dated to the ninth and the tenth century and around A.D. 1000 respectively (Jónsson ed. 1912).

The skaldic poems in their original forms were, like the pictures, products of the Viking Age and as Hallvard Lie has pointed out the two modes of expression are closely related, not only in choice of motifs, but also stylistically. On the basis of this theory, Lie has analyzed Bragi's stanzas about Þórr and the World Serpent and concluded that the poet attempts "a linguistic recreation of the shield's symbolic-emotional total effect" (44). The aim is thus not the narrative myth, but the non-narrative picture. The poem is intended to create a word-picture as opposed to a narrative, and Lie sees in this art form an attempt to express the myth's numinous element (44). Like the picture, the poem presents the myth in a situation, and we may therefore regard the elements of the poem as constituents of the myth. The medieval narrative versions thus contrast with the Viking Age's dramatic portrayals of situations. The story in *Gylfaginning* is one of the most important examples of the former, Bragi's poem of the latter. Both methods of manifesting the myth must build on the oral narrative form.

When we compare different variants, a fundamental problem is whether we are in fact dealing with variants of the same thing. As already mentioned, it is often difficult to understand stone pictures, and one or two features may not be sufficient to establish that just this or that myth or person is depicted on the stone. An example is the upper picture on the Altuna stone (fig. 1). Otto von Friesen (480) has interpreted this as a representation of Heimdallr with the Gjallarhorn; Oskar Lundberg (130 ff.) sees it as St. Óláfr on Jacob's Ladder. Gerd Wolfgang Weber (325 ff.) has subse quently, and far more plausibly, interpreted the picture as Óðinn in Hliðskjálf, particularly on the basis of the raven on the shoulder of the male figure. Verification of the myth depends on 'diagnostic features' such as this, and the question is which and how many are necessary in order to identify the myth. If we can resolve this, we will also be

better able to understand its meaning.⁷



Fig. 1 Altuna Stone



Fig. 2 Gosforth Stone and Fig. 3 Ardre Stone VIII



Fig. 4 Hordum Stone

In the myth of Þórr's fishing expedition, the two opponents, the god and the monster are integral features, and when we find that the Gosforth stone (fig. 2), in its surviving form, possibly does not depict the World Serpent, and that the Ardre stone (fig. 3) only has an indistinct figure which may possibly be interpreted as a sea monster, then these two representations must be regarded with a certain amount of skepticism. A third recurring element in the myth is the boat in which Þórr sits; it is not his usual means of transport and is therefore distinctive in this myth. The boat is absent only in the short fragments of Gamli *gnæfaðarskáld*'s and Qlvir *hnúfa*'s poems, but all we can conclude from these is that they tell of a fight between Þórr and the monster. An instrument of apparently equal importance to the boat is the ox head which Þórr uses as his bait, for without it the World Serpent would not have

swallowed the hook. Only the two medieval narrative versions tell how Þórr obtained the head. In the pictures it is depicted as already placed on the hook, and this must presuppose the story about the head's provenance. The head is not represented on the Hordum stone (fig. 4) in its present condition, but the explanation may be that the stone is eroded where the head should have been (Brøndsted, 102). The skaldic poems, except perhaps Bragi's, make no mention of the ox head, which may seem surprising. But we must assume that it was taken for granted, when the boat, the fishing line and the fight between Þórr and the serpent are all mentioned. These other features were sufficient to make the myth recognizable.⁸

In addition to Þórr and the serpent, a giant also appears in the myth. Snorri calls him Hymir or Ymir and in *Hymiskviða* he is called Hymir. In the other sources he is anonymous. He is mentioned in the skaldic poems, apart from the two brief fragments, and is shown on all the picture stones except Altuna. Thus he is also integral to the myth, and his absence from the Altuna stone requires an explanation. It is clear that here, too, Þórr tries to fish the World Serpent from the sea, but to account for the giant's absence, Otto von Friesen's explanation (482), that there was no room for him on the stone, will not suffice.⁹ The explanation must be that he was not required; otherwise the stone carver could have selected another stone, or used different dimensions. As it is, he has depicted Þórr on the center of the stone, larger than the other figures, so that he fills its entire width. The reference to the giant, and consequently to his function in the myth, is thus omitted. We must conclude that here the myth occurs in a different and probably reduced form, where only the opposition of god and monster itself interested the sculptor. If we look at the stone's surface as a whole, we may possibly see that the Þórr-scene is also placed in another context, beyond that of the myth as we know it from the other versions. In conjunction with the other pictures, Þórr illustrates the world and its chief components. Uppermost towards the heavens stands Óðinn with the raven, who belongs to the element of air, and above him an unexplained figure continues the upward movement. In the middle is the horseman on the horse of the earth. At the bottom stands Þórr with his line going down to the monster of the ocean's depths. If the artist intended to show this tripartite world of man and gods, he chose well in the myth of Þórr and the Miðgarðsormr.¹⁰

If we turn to the plot of the story, we see that both the skalds and the sculptors concentrated on the situation in which the serpent bites the hook. The stones show Þórr in the boat above the serpent and the taut line between them. Both the Hordum and the Altuna stones depict Þórr's foot penetrating the bottom of the boat and this detail is also found in Snorri, who relates that both feet went through the boat. Snorri did not have this from his skaldic poems,¹¹ but the foot through the boat motif does seem to have been a stable element in the myth. It gives a visual impression of the violent pull on the line, the vertical upward and downward movement during the struggle.

In the skaldic poems the same situation is expressed by other means. Bragi tells how the line is stretched and the serpent is dragged along the ocean floor (st. 16).¹² The monster is hauled right up to the gunwale (st. 17), as in *Hymiskviða* (st. 23). Eysteinn evokes the same picture by having Þórr's fists strike against the gunwale as the boat shoots forward (st.3). The poets further describe the confrontation of god and monster by having them stare into each other's eyes. Bragi has the serpent staring from below ("neðan") at Þórr (st. 17). Eysteinn relates that Þórr looks at the serpent with piercing eyes while the sea rages against the boat (st. 2) and *Húsdrápa* says that Þórr's eyes shoot rays of terror ("skaut ægisgeislum," st. 4) at the monster, while it in return stares with flashing eyes ("fránleitr") over the gunwale and spews venom. Snorri combined all these elements as follows (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 48):

Midgarðsormr gein yfir oxahǫfuðit en ǫngullinn vá í góminn orminum. En er ormrinn kendi þess, brá hann við svá hart at báðir hnefar Þórs skullu út á borðinu. Þá varð Þórr reiðr ok færðisk í ásmegin, spyrndi við svá fast at hann hljóp báðum fótum gǫgnum skipit ok spyrndi við grunni, dró þá orminn upp at borði. En þat má segja at engi hefir sá sét ógurligar sjónir er eigi mátti þat sjá er Þórr hvesti augun á orminn, en ormrinn starði neðan í mót ok blés eitrinu.

[The Midgard serpent stretched its mouth round the ox-head and the hook stuck into the roof of the serpent's mouth. And when the serpent felt this, it jerked away so hard that both Thor's fists banged down on the gunwale. Then Thor got angry and summoned up his As-strength, pushed down so hard that he forced both feet through the boat and braced them against the sea-bed, and then hauled the serpent up to the gunwale. And one can claim that a person does not know what a horrible sight is who did not get to see how Thor fixed his eyes on the serpent, and the serpent stared back up at him spitting poison.]¹³

It is precisely this terrible sight that the sculptors and skalds wanted to show, and it is precisely in this terrifying opposition of god and monster that the central element of the myth lies. We have here a representation of the universal opposition between the powers of the cosmos and the powers of chaos, similar to a number of other Nordic Viking Age motifs, but this battle is distinctive in that the god is placed on the sea, outside his natural element, and in the strong emphasis on the situation's vertical dimension: Þórr seeks to haul the serpent *up* from *its* element, while it on the contrary pulls *downwards* and tries to overturn the fragile vessel. It is a picture of a dramatic balance.

The course of events in the myth before and after this central scene is less intelligible, but it is nonetheless clear that the battle is part of a longer story. This can be deduced from the presence of the giant. He is with Þórr in the boat and that must presuppose an explanation of how he came to be there. In *Gylfaginning* and *Hymiskviða* Þórr visits Hymir before he goes fishing, and it is Hymir who takes him onto the sea. It is also from Hymir that Þórr obtains the ox head. The giant is thus the prerequisite for Þórr getting to the serpent and for hooking it. He effects Þórr's journey from the civilized world, Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr, to wild nature where the serpent lives. In *Gylfaginning* and

Hymiskviða the giant is a cattle-farmer and fisherman, since he owns the oxen and the fishing boat, and we must assume that the same functions were presupposed in the non-epic versions. As a fishing farmer the giant represents the transition from civilization to nature in a way that was immediately comprehensible to the medieval Icelanders, and no doubt also to the Viking Age Scandinavians (cf. Hastrup 1983, 44 ff.). There is a dichotomy between cattle farming and fishing, which describes this transition, for while farming submits nature to the mastery of civilization, fishing is an extension of culturally determined potentials *vis-à-vis* wild nature, which may be temporarily mastered, but still remains the same. The giant functions in the myth as an involuntary helper, as a mediator between the world of Þórr and the world of the monster. The distance between the two poles is made plain by his presence. Through several stages Þórr moves away from the cosmos, of which he is the master and to which he belongs, finally to fight the monster in its own element, the ocean depths, which is the opposite of the heavens of the god. The whole of this movement is an essential prerequisite for our understanding the outcome of the struggle. In *Hymiskviða* there is yet another transitional stage, at which Snorri also hints. Here Þórr's journey includes a visit to a farmer, who in *Hymiskviða* is called "hraunbúi" (he who lives in the lava; st. 38), or at the point of transition between pasture and mountain, at the edge of the habitable area. Þórr leaves his chariot and team of goats with the farmer; in the context of the myth this means that in order to reach the serpent he must relinquish the ride across the vault of heaven, the freedom of movement and the element which are his own. Þórr's journey thus takes the form of a series of transitions from the heavens to the earth and from land to sea. Furthermore, he rows farther out to sea than even the fisherman-giant cares for and throws his bait into the depths. Not only Snorri and *Hymiskviða* have this detail, but also Úlfr Uggason, who describes the giant's terror (st. 3), and Bragi, when he relates that the giant will not permit the serpent to be lifted from the sea (st. 19). The movement from the one pole of the dichotomy to the other finds further expression in the skalds' kennings. Bragi's poem incorporates the picture of the heavens in the scene on the ocean when Þórr is called he who 'threw the sky-goddess's father's eyes up onto the winds' wide basin' (st. 20). Eysteinn's poem presents the dichotomy's other dimension—from civilization to wild nature— by describing Þórr with kennings for family ties, the innermost core of civilization. He is called "Sifjar róni" (Sif's friend), "faðir Þrúðar" (Þrúðr's father) and "Ullsmágr" (Ullr's kinsman) in the three stanzas.

Among the picture stones, Ardre VIII (Fig. 3) is of great interest when we attempt to interpret the myth's first section. It shows a series of pictures which appear to be scenes in a narrative. We see a man entering a house in which an ox is standing, and then two men coming out of the same house, one of whom carries something which may be an ox head on his shoulder. In addition there are two pictures of the same two men in a boat. In one a man is harpooning a

fish. The other apparently shows Þórr with the Miðgarðsormr on the hook and the giant by his side (Lindqvist, 22 ff.). If these pictures do in fact represent our myth, then we have it in a stable form for over 500 years.

The stone pictures show that as Þórr pulls up the serpent, the giant cuts the line; the same is told by Bragi and Snorri. This is likewise a stable element from the earliest to the latest sources. As in the earlier part of the myth, the giant acts here as a mediating figure, but in the opposite way. Whereas before he made Þórr's cataclysmic action possible, he now prevents its completion and thereby saves the cosmic balance just as it is at the point of being upset.

On the events *after* the central scene, where the serpent swallows the hook, the sources are not in agreement. The consequences of Þórr's venture are expressed in *Hymiskviða* st. 24 in the following way:

Hreingálen hlumðo, enn hqlen þuto,
fór in forna fold qll saman:
Sœþiz síðan sá fiscr í mar.

[The sea-wolf shrieked and the underwater rocks re-echoed, all the ancient earth was collapsing: then that fish sank into the sea.]¹⁴

The world is about to founder, but as the fish sinks back into the sea, creation settles down again.

The divergence between the sources is in the tale of the Miðgarðsormr's fate. In *Húsdrápa*, Þórr strikes off its head and in *Hymiskviða* he strikes at the top of its head, although it is not told whether this results in the monster's death. In Bragi's version and in the pictures, except for Altuna, the serpent escapes with the aid of the giant. Snorri combines the two versions by first having Hymir cut the line and then telling how Þórr threw his hammer after the serpent. Hár says, referring to Úlfir, that it is said that Þórr struck off its head, but Hár himself thinks it more true that it survived and lies where it has always lain, around the earth (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 48; ed Faulkes, 45; tr. Faulkes, 47).

The ending is of decisive importance for the meaning of the myth and its position in the mythic sequence as a whole. We cannot establish which is the primary version. Students of comparative mythology consider that the earlier ending is that in which the serpent is killed, because it displays certain similarities with other and earlier Indo-European myths.¹⁵ As mentioned at the outset, the present aim is not to evaluate the comparative approach, but if the transmitted Nordic myth is viewed in its internal context, it does seem that the ending found in Bragi and Snorri is in greater harmony with the rest of the story. There is here a symmetry between the role of the giant in the beginning and at the end, and the whole course of events expresses a cosmic balance. In Snorri's tale it is also necessary for the World Serpent to survive until the final battle in Ragnarøk, but since this does not appear to be presupposed in the other versions, it may therefore be regarded as secondary.¹⁶ We may perhaps permit ourselves to discern a development in the history of the Nordic myth,

from an original version found in Bragi, where the outcome of the battle is undecided, to a later version in *Húsdrápa*, where the motif is confined to the battle itself, which, like other dragon fights, must end with the death of the monster. In this last version the giant is effectively superfluous, and indeed Úlfr Uggason only speaks of him humorously, as for example a “þjokkvaxinn þiklingr” (a stocky dumpling), who is frightened (st. 3). The natural consequence of the direct confrontation of hero and monster is the Altuna stone, where the giant is omitted. Snorri thus preferred the version in which the serpent remained as before; I shall now turn to how he integrated the myth into *Gylfaginning*.

The story comes in chapter 48 [Faulkes ed.], immediately after Þórr’s journey to Útgarðaloki and before the tale of Loki’s treachery and Baldr’s death, which leads into the description of Ragnarök. In Snorri’s composition the myth of Þórr’s fishing expedition is thus a part of the middle section, in which the gods are presented, but where the mythic chain of events described at the beginning and the end of *Gylfaginning* is not developed. In the preceding tale of Þórr at Útgarðaloki’s there is a similar movement from Ásgarðr to Jötunheimar and back, and this story can in some respects be regarded as a variant of the fishing-trip myth. In both tales Þórr travels to the giants without his goats and chariot; in both a giant helps him on his way; in both he tries and fails to extract the World Serpent from the sea. Snorri links the two stories in an epic succession, but in the mythical sequence they occupy the same place, as manifestations of the equilibrium which existed after the gods created the world.

If the myth of the fishing expedition is seen as a part of the whole sequence of events in *Gylfaginning*, it belongs to a time after this creation and after the birth and relegation to the sea of the World Serpent, but it is still before Ragnarök. At the same time the myth takes place in the horizontal world picture, where Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr lie in the center encircled by the ocean. Here the Miðgarðsormr has its function as the boundary of the circular world, and it is inherent in this meaning of boundary that the monster is a part of the cosmic order which will be destroyed if the monster does not stay in place. This function as a boundary of the world and consequently an indispensable part of the cosmos is indicated in the skalds’ kennings for the World Serpent: Bragi has “jarðar reistr” [earth-twister] (st. 14) and “endiseiðr allra landa” [surrounding saithe (a kind of fish) of all lands] (st. 15). Qlvir *hnúfa* has the expression “allra landa umbgjörð” [girdler of all lands]. Eysteinn uses “seiðr jarðar” [saithe-fish of earth] (st. 3) and Úlfr “storðar men” [necklace of earth] (st. 4) and “stirðpinull storðar” [earth’s stiff net-string] (st. 5). Finally, Gamli employs the circumlocution “grundar fiskr” [fish of the sea-bottom]. None of these kennings expresses any dichotomy between the monster and the earth; on the contrary, it is a case of connection. Þórr’s fishing is an attempt to dissolve the cosmic order, and in the attempt itself, and especially in its failure, lies a confirmation of that order. This is the fundamental meaning of

the myth, as it is presented in our sources. Þórr, the protector of gods and men, travels to the furthest limits of the world to meet the monster and the undecided battle between them demonstrates the cosmic balance. Seen in this way, the myth expresses a world picture in which time is reversible and where the confirmation of the cosmic order can be repeated, as also happens elsewhere in Nordic mythology in Þórr's repeated controversies with the giants.¹⁷

But this is, of course, not the fundamental conception in *Gylfaginning*. Here time is not reversible. The mythic sequence of events leads on to the destruction of the gods and the world, and the World Serpent is one of the Ragnarøk monsters. Its function here changes from being a part of the cosmos to being a destroyer of the world. It moves from the sea to the land and it is not eternal; it has a life span from birth to death. Snorri relates that the Miðgarðsormr, Fenrir the wolf, and Hel are the progeny of Loki and the giantess Angrboða, who in her very name (distress-bringer) encapsulates what is to follow. This paternity is confirmed in the first stanza of Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*, where Loki is called "lǫgseims faðir" (the sea-band's [i.e. the World Serpent's] father). In *Gylfaginning*, Óðinn has the three monsters brought to Ásgarðr, and he takes the serpent and throws it into the sea, where it grows until it encircles the world.

This explanation of the origin of the World Serpent is typical of Snorri's conception of history. He sees in life a balance between opposite forces and explains the dynamics of history dialectically, as a result of the confrontation and interaction of these forces (Meulengracht Sørensen 1977b and 1977a, 159 ff.). In his story of the creation, the fathers of the gods are themselves gods, but their mothers are giants. Conversely, Loki's father, Fárbauti, is a giant, while his mother, Laufey, must be presumed to be a kinswoman of the Æsir (Meulengracht Sørensen 1977a, 763 ff.). Their son, Loki, incorporates this dual inheritance and is predestined to bring the gods to grief. Óðinn attempts to prevent this coming about by adopting Loki among the Æsir, his maternal kindred. According to *Lokasenna*, the two blend their blood together; they become sworn brothers. This genealogical model is then repeated in the succeeding generations when Loki, the kinsman of the Æsir, has children by a giantess and thereby fathers monsters. This time there is no possibility of adopting the progeny, but because of the kinship neither can it be destroyed. The explanation is at its clearest in *Gylfaginning*'s story of Fenrir. The gods let the wolf grow up in their home and thus rear a monster in Ásgarðr itself, but when it grows to a great size they have to bind it and thereafter it must be chained until Ragnarøk, when it tears itself loose and swallows Óðinn. To the question why the gods did not kill the wolf, Snorri lets Hár reply that this they could not do in their own sanctuary. We might venture to add, without direct support in the sources and merely as speculation, that the danger of Fenrir and the Miðgarðsormr lay in their kinship with the Æsir themselves.

Snorri explains the sequence of events leading to Ragnarøk as a

transgression of the boundary between cosmos and chaos, and he has a similar explanation for the origins of the gods (Meulengracht Sørensen 1977b, 762 ff.). The explanatory pattern is in both cases genealogical and in correspondence with the existing social norms in medieval Scandinavia.¹⁸ In this sequence the myth of Þórr's fishing does not appear to have any particular function, nor does Snorri attempt to link it with the sequence. One detail, however, reveals that behind this account in *Gylfaginning* lay a myth in which Þórr's battle with the serpent took place in early mythic times. Snorri writes that Þórr goes off fishing as a young man or 'in the shape of a young man'. The expression is "svá sem ungr drengr." In *Hymiskviða* he is correspondingly described as "sveinn" [lad, st. 18,]. Vogt and most other scholars have taken Snorri's expression to mean that Þórr assumed the shape of a young man in order to trick the giant.¹⁹ It is not, however, quite clear whether "svá sem ungr drengr" should be understood in this way, and it is certainly not one of Þórr's customary activities to assume shapes other than his own. In any event, Snorri here seems to build on Bragi's poem, which in st. 14 says that Þórr "snimma" would try his strength against the serpent. Vogt interprets "snimma" as 'eilig', (quickly, hastily, 212 ff.). Finnur Jónsson translates the word with 'fordums' (in old times) and characterizes Vogt's interpretation as 'less correct' (1966, 523). The most common meaning of "snimma" is 'early', often in relation to a person's age, but whether we choose to understand Bragi's expression as meaning early in the mythic sequence or early in Þórr's life, the import is much the same. Bragi has seen Þórr as a young man when the fight takes place. Snorri probably took Bragi's expression in this sense; since he places the myth late in his composition of *Gylfaginning*, just before the events leading to Ragnarök, he may have interpreted Þórr's youthfulness as being assumed. On the basis of Bragi we may take it that Þórr's attempt to pull the serpent from the sea belongs to the beginning of the mythic sequence, as a confirmation of the cosmic order and perhaps as an introduction to Þórr's role of protector of the world of gods and men.

Finally, I shall outline some of the main points in the preceding discussion. In the Viking Age versions, as in the medieval, the myth tells of a journey undertaken by Þórr, the god of the heavens, from Ásgarðr to the end, or the boundary, of the world, where the Miðgarðsormr lies in the ocean, placed there by the gods. The dichotomy between cosmos and chaos is strongly marked by a series of transitions, and for Þórr to get from his own element to that of the monster he must enlist the help of the giant who lives by the sea; the giant prevents the completion of the struggle and thereby saves the world order. What would have happened had Þórr extracted the serpent from the sea, the myth does not tell. Its point is that it does *not* happen and that the universal dichotomy is thereby both marked and confirmed.

In the accounts of Úlfr Uggason and the Altuna stone, both from the decades around A.D. 1000, the story concentrates on the confrontation itself, between the god and the monster, and when Úlfr has Þórr kill the serpent, the

myth has acquired a different meaning. It no longer expresses the balance between the cosmic forces but a triumph over the negative forces. Snorri places the myth apparently at random in *Gylfaginning*. It has no function in his presentation of an irreversible mythic sequence of events, and here it may, incidentally, be noted that neither does *Völuspá* use the myth in its corresponding sequence. Snorri, on the other hand, has a genealogical explanation for the nature of the Miðgarðsormr which is otherwise found only in *Þórsdrápa*. Here the serpent and Fenrir function, already at the time of their birth, as portents of Ragnarök, and it is possible to read *Gylfaginning*'s story of the fishing expedition as Þórr's attempt to avert Ragnarök. This reading is, however, not directly supported by Snorri's text, whereas Þórr's journey is only explained as a revenge for the ignominious visit to Útgardaloki.

In the Viking Age sources there is nothing to indicate an association between the myth of the fishing expedition and the concept of Ragnarök. We must assume that Snorri incorporated a myth that expressed the conception of a static cosmos and reversible time into the eschatological world view which he found in *Völuspá* and other Eddic poems. Snorri recounts all the essential features of the Viking Age sources, even the "foot through the boat" motif, which is otherwise known to us only from the pictures. As far as we can see, he does not make any radical changes to the earlier myth. In this respect we may consider him to be a reliable mythologist. On the other hand, he places the myth in a context where its original meaning, as a confirmation of the cosmic order, does not become clear. This meaning is only revealed when Snorri's version is compared with the stone pictures and the skaldic poems.

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Notes

1. See e.g. Moltke, 180 ff. and on the Rök stone, Jansson, 32ff.
2. Konstantin Reichardt dates *Hymiskviða* to the third decade of the thirteenth century (152 ff.). F. R. Schröder thinks that the poem may be older, or rather that there were earlier variants (6 ff.). Einar Ól. Sveinsson suggests the eleventh century (1962, 347 ff.).
3. See e.g. Dumézil, 23 ff.; Schröder, especially 29 ff.
4. See Gschwantler and references there; cf. Kabell.
5. Cf. Neckel, 72 ff.
6. See Jónsson 1895; cf. Lie, 5ff.
7. The term “diagnostic feature” is from Margeson, whose essay also discusses the problem of verification. Cf. Weber, 324ff. and Schier.
8. With reference to the *Snorra-Edda's* *Pulur*, Kabell interprets Litr in Bragi's kenning “*ængull fangboð a forns Litar flotna*” [hook of the combat-offerer of the men of old Litr (a giant), i.e. hook of Þórr] (st. 18) as a heiti for “ox”, which would mean that the ox is mentioned there.
9. Cf. Jansson in *Upplands Runskrifter*, 616.
10. An interpretation of the Altuna stone's pictures in conjunction with the inscription is given in Weber.

11. Wolf (13) thinks that Snorri took this detail over from the pictures. This is possible, but it cannot be proven.
12. Numbering according to *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*.
13. Ed. Faulkes, 44–5; tr. Faulkes, 47. Wolf's suggestion (13) that Snorri was the first to combine Þórr looking at the serpent with the serpent looking at Þórr is incorrect. The combination is found in *Húsdrápa* sts. 4 and 5.
14. Cited from Neckel & Kuhn; translation supplied from Larrington.
15. Schier (433 ff.) thinks that the earliest form of the myth is preserved in *Húsdrápa*, where Þórr kills the World Serpent.
16. de Boor does not consider Þórr's fight with the Miðgarðsormr to have been an original element in the Ragnarøk myth (141). Cf. de Vries, 2:143 and Schier, 435.
17. The concepts of reversibility and irreversibility, the horizontal and the vertical in the world picture of Nordic mythology are discussed by Melitinskij and Hastrup (1981a; 1985). In Melitinskij's opinion: "The name itself 'The Serpent of Midgard' indicates perhaps that it was earlier thought of as a positive element of the cosmic system, but that in the strongly 'eschatologically' structured Scandinavian mythology, Jǫrmungandr became only one of the chaotic forces which had been brought temporarily under control by the gods" (47). Hastrup writes that "in the horizontal model the serpent of Miðgarðr, Miðgarðsormr forms a kind of negative boundary between earth and the world-ocean" (1985, 150).
18. A description of the Icelandic kinship system is given in Meulengracht Sørensen 1977a, 30 ff.; and in Hastrup 1981b and 1985, 72 ff.
19. Vogt 211; cf. Reichardt, 147 ff. and Wolf, 10. In Schröder's opinion, however, *Hymiskviða*'s "sveinn" means only that Þórr is a young god (4).

“Form and Content in *Lokasenna*: A Re-evaluation”

Philip N. Anderson

Lokasenna

The title *Lokasenna* conveys its genre more particularly than most Eddic titles: a *senna* or verbal duel between Loki and the other gods. (On the genre, see the article by Carol Clover reprinted in this volume.) A prose introduction links the poem with the one preceding it in the Codex Regius, *Hymiskviða*; now that Þórr has obtained a cauldron from the giant Hymir, Ægir brews ale for a feast attended by all the gods with the exception of Þórr who will not arrive until the end of the poem. Loki has killed one of Ægir’s serving-men and been chased away. The poem begins with him speaking to Ægir’s other serving-man; he inquires about the feast and announces his attention to intrude upon it ‘to mix mischief with mead’. Bragi denies Loki a place but Loki reminds Óðinn of a past obligation. Víðarr serves Loki who then toasts everyone except Bragi, who says he will compensate Loki with a ring if he refrains from making trouble. Loki says Bragi is the most ‘wary of war’ of all the ‘gods and elves’ in the hall. Bragi blusters and Loki insults him with worse. Íðunn intervenes and Loki calls her the most ‘man-crazed’, thus setting a pattern for the rest of the poem, in which the following all intervene and are insulted in turn: Gefjon, Óðinn, Frigg, Freyja, Njǫrðr, Týr, Freyr, Byggvir (‘Barley,’ a servant of Freyr), Heimdallr, Skaði (Njǫrðr’s wife, a giantess), Sif and Beyla (Byggvir’s wife). Finally Þórr arrives and threatens Loki with violence. Loki insults him for a few interchanges but then retreats, saying, ‘because I know you will strike [or kill]’. A prose epilogue, probably drawn from Snorri’s *Edda*, details Loki’s subsequent fate. The Æsir bind him and place a snake over him that drips venom. His wife Sigyn holds a basin to catch the venom but when she has to empty it, Loki shudders violently, thus causing earthquakes.

Lokasenna is edited, translated and given a full commentary in Dronke’s new edition (1997). She discusses Indo-European analogues to the intruder at

the feast motif and to satire of the gods. Gurevich argues that such satire in *Lokasenna* does not represent any late crisis in heathendom but functions as (Bakhtinian) carnival and reflects a tragicomic Norse world view. Swenson (72–79) emphasizes Loki’s acting as a threat to the Æsir community’s sense of self. McKinnell first shows that Loki’s insulting claims are true if biased; he discusses in detail each of the interchanges between Loki and the gods. He then argues that Loki’s motivation is to provoke a final breach between himself and the gods and thus precipitate the events at Ragnarök. Similarly, Meulengracht Sørensen thinks Loki frustrates the Æsir who were intending through the feast to incorporate the realm of the gods peaceably into their own cosmos. Söderberg gives evidence that *Lokasenna* parodies passages from many of the other Eddic mythological poems while reflecting cultural practices of the early twelfth century, such as the exchange of mocking verses at the Reykjahólar wedding feast (described in *Dorgils saga ok Hafliða*). By contrast, Dronke (1989) argues for composition during the heathen period.

In the essay reprinted below, Philip N. Anderson argues for the artful use of repetition, wordplay, and metrical and dramatic effects in *Lokasenna*, which is thereby transformed beyond a mere catalogue of the more scandalous deeds of the gods.

Faul Acker

Further Reading

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Form and Content in *Lokasenna*: A Re-evaluation

Critics usually view *Lokasenna* as a malicious travesty of the gods of the ancient Scandinavians. Its value to modern scholarship has been thought to lie mainly in its references to myths and legends not otherwise recorded, while its literary merits have been largely overlooked. *Lokasenna* probably was, as we shall see, originally intended as a “handbook” of the deeds of the gods. But this does not negate the value of the work as literature. This becomes especially apparent when we consider the close relationship between form and content, purpose and expression, which the poem displays.

Lokasenna is generally viewed as the product either of a Christian writer or of a pagan skald disillusioned with contemporary religious mores. The poem then represents the passing of the old religious order. In Anne Holtmark’s opinion: “Det er rimelig å sette Lokasenna til en tid da den gamle religion var i oppløsning. Man har ment at det hører hjemme omkring 1000 [Det] har neppe tjent religiøst formål.”¹ [It is fitting to ascribe *Lokasenna* to a time when the old religion was dissolving. It has been thought that it belongs to around 1000 ... It would scarcely have served a religious aim.] Elsewhere she states: “Lokasenna er ment å vekke latter—og gjør det ennå idag Lokasenna kan være diktet sent av en skald som behandlet gammelt mytestoff helt litterært.... Det er mest fristende å tenke seg at forfatteren har skullet underholde i en slik forsamling for kristendommen var antatt for alvor, men hvor den gamle religion heller ikke vekte noen ærefrykt.”² [*Lokasenna* was meant to make one laugh— and it still does so today. *Lokasenna* may have been composed late by a poet who treated the old mythological material in a completely literary fashion. It is very tempting to imagine that the author was providing entertainment at a gathering where Christianity was taken seriously, where the old religion certainly no longer commanded any respect.] Jan de Vries accuses the poet of modeling Loki after himself: “Der Dichter hatte augenscheinlich eine Lokinatur in sich und es hat ihn gefreut mit lukanischer Frechheit die alte Götterwelt anzuprangern: man soll deshalb nicht jede Verleumdung für bare Münze annehmen.”³ [The poet is obviously a Loki by nature and it delighted him to pillory the old world of the gods with a Lucan-like impertinence; thus one should not take every slander at face value.] And Lee M. Hollander has called it the “product of a witty and clever skald who conceived the idea of showing the solemn and glorious gods from their seamy side.”⁴

The poem as we have it is part of the collection known as the *Elder* or *Sæmundar Edda*, a thirteenth-century edition of poems presumably much

older than that. To the thirteenth-century reader this collection would have had an antiquarian interest, since Scandinavia had been Christian for quite some time.⁵ If the poet wrote at a time when Christianity was already the state religion, it might at first seem that he is interested in emphasizing the crude behavior ascribed to the pagan gods by the old myths, in order to pave the way for an unfavorable comparison of the old religion to Christianity. And, indeed, from the majestic Odin to the powerful Thor, the poem leaves no god unscathed, often resorting to scurrilous and bawdy tales.

Georges Dumézil, however, rejects this Christian-authorship hypothesis. “I do not believe,” he writes, “that it is the work of a Christian, nor of an ‘old pagan’ who polemicizes against the pagan mythologizers of later times. In all polytheism, in all supernatural anthropomorphism, the gods have their weaknesses, of which the believers can make fun—as the listeners of the Homeric poems did—without impiety or bad intentions. The ‘Wranglings of Loki’ does not have the tone of Lucretius.”⁶ We do, as a matter of fact, have a case of deliberate blasphemy of the pagan gods in Hjaltri Skjeggjason’s famous poem at the Icelandic Althing, dating from around the same period as the presumed origin of *Lokasenna*:

Spari ek eigi goð geyja!
Grey þykki mér Freyja;
æ mun annat tveggja
Óðinn grey eða Freyja.⁷

[In blaspheming the gods I am rich; Freyja strikes me as a bitch; one or the other must be: Odin’s a dog, or else she.]

This is an intentional calumny against the gods. *Lokasenna*, precisely because it represents the words of Loki, the personification of evil, and because the gods attempt to defend themselves, assumes a different character.

The skald no doubt originally intended his poem to be a kind of dictionary of mythology, a compilation of a list of the gods and the major myths associated with each one. A comparison with other Eddic poems shows that the use of a poem as a catalog of various myths, names and events, is not limited to *Lokasenna*. Such poems were presumably used by the skalds as mnemonic devices. *Hárbarðsljóð*, for example, presents a catalog of the various adventures ascribed to Odin and Thor in the form of a quarrel between the two gods. The quarrel itself seems unmotivated, suggesting that the concept of the catalog is more important than the story of their argument. Similarly, *Grimnismál* describes the geography of the cosmos within the framework of the struggle of Odin with an earthly king, making only a vague attempt to relate the matter of the poem to the subject of the prologue and epilogue. *Lokasenna* stands out from these other catalogs precisely because of the way the poet is able to relate form to content. The poet no doubt recognized that his poem would deal with myths that to him and his audience would have a pejorative cast. The choice of Loki as chief speaker is therefore

a necessary one, for who else but Loki would know such intimate details of the private lives of the gods and would be willing to confront them with these details? In this way, even the stories of the death of Balder, the loss of Tyr's hand, and Heimdall's role as guardian of the gods, all of which attest to the valor and courage of the gods, can be used against them. Hollander calls Loki the "Mephistophelian Loki, who engages the various gods and goddesses in a *senna* (a *flying*, or running dialog of vituperation)." ⁸ This, then is the basic tone of the work, which is "unerhört frech" ⁹ because of the use of Loki. The poet's characterizations of the gods are based upon the myths which have come down to him as seen through the eyes of Loki.

To be sure, the tone of all the mythic material does not need alteration to fit Loki's malicious intentions. There are many references to behavior which the skald and his audience would have considered shameful. Freyja's promiscuity, Njord's incest, and Odin's sexually indecent magic are traits scarcely in keeping with what would generally be considered the dignity of a god. As Dumézil has said: "the few dialogue poems of the *Poetic Edda* where sarcasms are employed, such as the *Hárbarðsljóð* which pits Odin against Thor, and the *Lokasenna* where Odin, like the other gods, submits to the malicious allusions of Loki, enable us to catch sight of other less glorious or ambiguous traits of the god [Odin], notably of a lascivious order." ¹⁰ Yet these acts are undeniably part of the legends which concern the Æsir. In order to be able to list all the major associations connected with the gods, which included both bad and good qualities in terms of the skald's own standards, the poet needs the flexibility provided by Loki, for his hatred of the gods as well as his intimacy with them is well known. These conditions also establish the time of the banquet in Ægir's hall to be just prior to the end of the world. That Loki could be so free and openly critical of his benefactors could only be taken as a sign that Ragnarøk, the Doom of the Gods, was at hand. Even Loki could not escape the wrath which would be aroused by such insults. The resignation and pessimism with which the gods submit to Loki is due partly to their respect for Ægir's hall ("Þar var griðastaðir mikill" [It was a place of strict sanctuary] Prologue, line 12), ¹¹ but surely it is also from their acceptance of the fate that is in store for them.

Originally, of course, these myths emphasized the power and mystery of the gods and were not intended to ascribe shameful acts to them. The people among whom these stories first circulated no doubt felt that these things were somehow part of the world of the gods. Freyja's promiscuity was merely a reflection of her fertility as earth or vegetation goddess while Odin's sorcery would have grown out of his control over natural and supernatural forces. The gods operated in an "amoral" sphere—that is, ordinary human moral standards did not originally apply to them. As the myths became codified the gods and their acts gradually lost their aura of mystery and could be viewed in terms of human ideas of right and wrong.

Frigg exhibits an awareness of the shift in perspective concerning what

were originally the “forn rǫc,” the great deeds of the past. Her reaction to this shift in emphasis is to avoid mentioning these deeds altogether:

Ørlǫgom ycom scylit aldregi
segja seggiom frá
hvat iþ æsir tveir drýgðot í árdaga;
firriz æ forn rǫc firar. (stanza 25)

[Your actions ought never to be spoken in front of people, what you two Æsir did in past times; always keep ancient matters concealed.]

The poet, however, does not just mention these acts, he dwells on them, making them the subject of his poem. In context we can see that these deeds are in fact forgotten. These mistakes cannot be undone or erased, but neither do they rule the gods’ present lives. That they live up to their ideals now is more important than the mistakes of the past. The gods quickly defend one another from Loki’s attacks, pointing out that contrary to Loki’s charges they are more aware than before of what constitutes nobility and worthiness. Tyr says that Frey’s regard for mortals far outweighs the same of having bought his bride Gerd with his sword (st. 37), while Odin claims that the knowledge which Gefjon shares with Frigg and himself, but does not divulge, is evidence of a status which sexual peccadilloes cannot erase (st. 21). Loki becomes the means by which the poet allows a glimpse of the innate nobility of the gods to show through their shame. This ability to acknowledge Loki’s accusations of unbecoming behavior and yet ascribe positive traits to the gods is one of the signs of the poet’s control over his work, particularly in his use of the conventions of skaldic poetry and the *flyting* to delineate a sense of personality. Typically, the gods alternate between defending each other while Loki abuses them. The dialogue which results from this is utilized by the poet to create a sense of tension and drama.

Each of Loki’s charges comes under one of two basic rubrics. He accuses the gods of unmanliness, or cowardice and sexual indecency, and he accuses the goddesses of unwomanliness, or the prized feminine virtues of constancy and chastity. The poet uses this limitation to delineate personality, for no two accusations are alike, and no two gods respond with the same words and phrases.

A comparison of the poet’s handling of Bragi and Tyr, both of whom are accused of cowardice and yet react in different ways, shows that the poet has framed each god’s response in terms of a definite personality. Bragi is the first to become involved in Loki’s quarrel upon the latter’s return to Ægir’s hall. Loki has defied Bragi to evict him from the hall; in anger Bragi accepts the challenge, explaining that Loki, as the killer of Ægir’s servant and destroyer of the peace, is not welcome there. Bragi then repents, realizing that he was wrong to try to turn someone away. He offers recompense to Loki for his harsh words, in the hope of avoiding another confrontation:

Mar oc mæki gef ec þér míns fiár,
oc bætir þér svá baugi Bragi;
síðr þú ásom Ƿfund um gjaldir,
gremðu eigi goð at þér! (st. 12)

[A horse and a sword I'll give you from my possessions, and Bragi will compensate you with a ring, so you don't repay the Æsir with hatred; don't make the gods exasperated with you!]

Bragi is, of course, the god of poetry and it is therefore not surprising to find that his language is characterized by phrases borrowed from heroic poetry. He offers the compensation usually paid by one warrior to another: swords, horses, and rings. He threatens Loki by reminding him of his own fighting ability, while stressing his restraint with regard to the sanctity of Ægir's hall. Loki is quick to seize upon his words, pointing out that Bragi's talk is not supported by corresponding prowess with the sword. Bragi "beccscrautuðr" [bench-ornament] (st. 15) may talk from a hero's point of view, but, according to Loki, his talk is merely poetic and lacking in substance.

Loki directs against Tyr the same charge of cowardice, but this time it is implicit rather than explicit. Loki suggests that since Tyr has lost his right hand to the Wolf (who is, of course, Loki's son), he has also lost his ability to fight. He says in regard to Tyr's handicap: "þú kunnir aldregi/ bera tilt með tveim" [you can never deal straight with people] (st. 38). But Tyr proves to be less volatile than Bragi. The god who would not cry out when the Fenris Wolf bit off his hand reminds Loki that he has never shown the cowardice which Loki ascribes to him. Loki must resort to another insult in which he reminds Tyr that he has never taken revenge for the adultery of his wife with Loki.

We do not have any other references in the corpus of Norse literature to this episode, so we do not know what happened to Loki or Tyr as a result of his wife's infidelity, nor even his wife's name. For all we know Loki was punished in some fashion, as in the stories of Idunn's abduction and the shearing of Sif's hair, where Loki is required to make good the damage he has done. But despite the damaging evidence that Tyr has received neither "Ƿln né penning ... / vanrétts" [not an ell nor a penny for this injury] (st. 40) from Loki, Tyr's courage cannot be called into question, precisely because of the Fenris Wolf episode. This heroism is underscored in his defense of Frey, where Tyr shows himself to be modest and self-effacing without compromising his nobility and courage. He interrupts Loki's condemnation of Frey, the god of peace, to call Frey "beztr allra ballriða/ ása gorðom í" [the best of all the bold riders in the courts of the Æsir] (st. 37). As a justification for this statement, he points out that Frey has never caused any woman to weep for a husband or son lost in battle. This is extraordinary praise coming from the god of war. Tyr also praises Frey's loosening of chains. The chaining of the Wolf was, of course, Tyr's responsibility; any victor in a battle on earth, hence someone who had been the recipient of Tyr's favor, would naturally take his enemies prisoner. In both cases Tyr shows himself capable of

admiring virtues outside his own realm of influence, even to the point of negating the effects of his own warlike responsibilities. As a final example, we see that Tyr has accepted the loss of his sword hand as the price to be paid for getting rid of a truly evil being:

Handar em ec vanr, enn þú Hróðrsvitnis,
bǫl er beggia þrá;
úlfgi hefir oc vel, er í bǫndom seal
biða ragna rǫcrs. (st. 39)

[I may have lost a hand, but you've lost the famous wolf; evil has come to us both; it's not pleasant for the wolf, who must in shackles wait for the twilight of the gods.]

In a similar fashion, the poet introduces the remaining Vanir, Frey's sister Freyja and their father Njord. Njord's first reaction to the charge that his daughter has slept with all the gods and elves is to say that her sins are not nearly as bad as those of Loki:

Þat er válitit, þótt sér varðir vers fái,
hós eða hvárs;
hitt er undr, er áss ragr er hér inn of kominn,
oc hefir sá born of borit. (st. 33)

[That's harmless, if, besides a husband, a woman has a lover or someone else; what is surprising is a pervert god coming in here who has borne children.]

Judged even by the standards of Vanaheim, where brother-sister incest is the norm, Loki's perverse sexual behavior is more contemptible than that of the Vanir. Unable to get the best of Njord in that fashion, Loki reminds him of his status as a hostage to the Æsir and of the degrading treatment which he received on his way to Asgard to begin his exile. Njord's reaction to these charges appears to be a proud and stoic acceptance of his misfortunes. He agrees with Loki that his lot is not the happiest; but he also insists that it is not without its rewards:

Sú eromc líc, er ec varc langt heðan
gisl um sendr at goðom:
þá ec mǫg gat, þann er mangi fiár,
oc þiccir sá ása iaðarr. (st. 35)

[That was my reward, when I, from far away, was sent as hostage to the gods, that I fathered that son, whom no one hates and is thought the prince of Æsir.]

Although he does not defend himself, Njord has his son Frey as proof that the Vanir are in no way baser than the other gods. Freyja has also answered Loki along similar lines, in a paraphrase of Loki's accusation against her (st. 31). To have loved all the gods, even sexually, is far better than to be considered their enemy. She and her father reject Loki's criticism because they find that

he embodies crimes worse than those of which they have been accused. The nobility of the Vanir, despite the truth of Loki's charges, outweighs the malicious character of Loki.

As seen from Freyja's words, the repetition of words and phrases is not only a poetic formula; it is also closely connected to the content of the dialogue in progress. Repetition of lines and phrases serves to emphasize particular points and give an indication of what the poet finds important about the speaker. Idunn's diplomacy, for example, appears not only in her attempts to withdraw her husband Bragi from the quarrel with Loki but also in her repetition of the word *lastastqfom*, or 'words of abuse.' Odin is the first to use this term in a reproach to Loki (st. 10). Idunn repeats the word twice, once in stanza 16 and again in 18. She applies it first to her husband and then to herself, claiming that she has no desire to be associated with such words:

Loca ec qveðca lastastqfom
Ægis hóllo í . . . (st. 18)

[I'm not saying words of abuse to Loki in Ægir's hall.]

In doing so, of course, she chastises Loki at the same time. The term is first applied to him and all subsequent mentions of it will have the same connotation. Idunn attempts to make peace in a way in which she hopes will not be likely to antagonize Loki further.

A different effect is created by the repetition of whole passages in the altercation between Loki and Skadi. Skadi picks up the threat first uttered by Frey against Loki. This time, however, the threat is not couched in vague terms of imprisonment or curtailment of freedom, as it is in Frey's words (cf. st. 41). Skadi points out the details of Loki's future punishment, which will include the death of one of his sons:

Létt er þér, Loki, munattu lengi svá
leica lausom hala;
þviát þic á hiqrvi scolo ins hrímkalda magar
gqrmom binda goð (st. 49)

[You're light-hearted, Loki; you won't for long play with your tail wagging free, for on a sharp rock, with your ice-cold son's guts, the gods shall bind you.]

Although Loki was probably aware of this impending punishment before, the poet shows him reacting strongly to the threat, almost as if he were stunned, by repeating the passage almost word for word. This is, of course, a convention of epic and oral poetry, but this is the first time that Loki has done so, and the only time in the poem when words used against him are not turned around into a criticism of his attacker. He recognizes that Skadi is a formidable opponent and indicates by his repetition of her words that he takes her threats seriously. He recovers from his shock and tries to avenge himself by saying what he hopes will dismay her the most, namely that he was

responsible for the death of her father:

... fyrst oc øfstr var ec at fiqlagi,
þars vér á þiaza þrifom. (st. 50)

[first and foremost I was at the killing when we attacked Thjazi.]

Skadi's reaction, which also includes the repetition of the last half of Loki's verse, indicates her acknowledgment of Loki's confession of guilt. In its understatement, however, her threat is far more effective than all the others which have gone before. In effect she swears by all she holds sacred that she will be his most implacable enemy:

Veiztu, ef fyrstr oc øfstr vartu at fiqlagi,
þá er ér á þiaza þrifoð:
frá mínom véom oc vqngom scola
þér æ kqld ráð koma. (st. 51)

[You know, if first and foremost you were at the killing when you attacked Thjazi, from my sanctuaries and plains shall always come baneful advice to you.]

This repetition reflects not only the tense thrust and parry of their battle of words but helps depict their different personalities. Loki's brash reliance on the past as a weapon is contrasted to Skadi's coldly logical threats of future enmity. Loki does succeed in finding a way of silencing her (cf. st. 52), but it is clear the Skadi has defended herself as well as she could, given the sacred nature of Ægir's hall and the character of her opponent.

Yet another effect is achieved with the repetition of Thor's words. The poet ascribes four stanzas to Thor (57, 59, 61, 63) and in each stanza repeats the first three lines of stanza 57. Further, the last three lines of each stanza contain paraphrases of each other. In all four stanzas the basic idea is the threat which Thor poses to Loki. The words "Þegi þú" [Be silent] which begin these stanzas are certainly intended to invite comparison with Loki's words, for the latter has used this formula twelve times before in addressing each god.¹² The comparison seems to be to Loki's advantage, for as mentioned earlier, all his varied accusations and replies apparently succeed in silencing the gods. Thor, on the other hand, can only repeat himself, being unable to find another mode of arguing with Loki. Loki's ingenuity is made further apparent as he continues to taunt and tease the great thunder god, while the latter can only brandish his hammer and call for silence. Thor appears to be a tongue-tied blusterer, and this leads de Vries to declare: "Man kann also kaum behaupten, daß der Dicter für Thor eine besonders große Verehrung gehegt habe."¹³ [One can scarcely say that the poet nurtured a particularly great respect for Thor.]

But it is important to remember that it is the threat of Thor's hammer which finally forces Loki to give in and leave the hall. Thor has his weakness, as do the other gods; he remains, as they do, in a position superior to Loki. Loki realizes and admits that Thor cannot be disposed of as easily as the other

gods, precisely because of Thor's incessant "Þegi þú, rǫg vætr!" [Be silent, you evil (perverted) creature]. Loki knows that Thor will not be bound much longer by the conventions of the hall, conventions upon which he has relied to guarantee his acceptance into the community of the gods:

Qvað ec fyr ásom, qvað ec fyr ása sonom,
þatz mic hvatti hugr;
enni fyr þér einom mun ec út ganga,
þvrat ec veit, at þú vegr. (st. 64)

[I spoke before the Æsir, I spoke before the sons of the Æsir, what my spirit urged me, but before you alone I shall go out, for I know that you do strike.]

In the hands of the poet, Thor's apparently simple-minded repetitions prove that the gods still have the power and the ability, embodied in the person of Thor, to rid themselves of evil, no matter how firmly entrenched it is. Thor symbolizes the blind justice of the gods which is able to go beyond the restraints of civilized life. It is his responsibility to fight the giants, or the personifications of evil which threaten the world, and he is therefore able to recognize that evil in ways which the other Æsir cannot or do not do. Loki, born of giants, is an evil which they themselves have nurtured and which they therefore cannot rid themselves of easily. Eventually, however, even Loki must give way before the gods' inherent aversion to evil. Unfortunately, the expulsion of Loki implies their own doom, for they are tainted by his deeds, most of their sins having originally been caused by him. This is a fact which the poet continually emphasizes through Loki's arrogant boasts. The series of accusations becomes the final excess which moves the gods to punish the evil which they have fostered for so long. But since Loki is also the personification of their own failings, he drags the gods down with him. Loki becomes the agent not only of his own doom but of the gods as well.

Although there is only slight plot in *Lokasenna*, there is a definite development in the poem, which serves as the background to the dramatic atmosphere which the poet creates. The development is subtle, but it is felt as a mounting tension which leads up to the arrival of Thor and to Loki's subsequent departure. The development is punctuated by the use of metrical variations, which serve also to delineate the personalities which the author establishes.

The majority of the stanzas of the poem are written in *ljóðaháttur*, 'chant' or 'song' meter. There is a variation of this six line stanza called, significantly, *galdralag*, 'incantation' or 'magic song' meter. This variation involves the addition of another three stress line ['full line'] to the *ljóða-báttur* stanza. The effectiveness of this variation is derived from its similarity to the basic verse form. Until the seventh line of the *galdralag*, which is linked by grammatical forms and complementary sentence structure to the sixth line but is not anticipated by the preceding lines, the two verse forms are exactly alike. The seventh line therefore comes as a surprise to the reader or listener, thereby

assuming a power lacking in an ordinary stanza, a power which perhaps explains the origin of the term ‘incantation meter’.

In *Lokasenna*, all four stanzas in *galdralag* (st. 13, 54, 62, 65) are spoken by Loki; they carry more weight than the basic *ljóðaháttir* stanzas, and they represent attempts by Loki to use magic to increase his power and influence in his confrontations with the gods. The pattern of the stanzas creates the effect of a progression in Loki’s thoughts, and it also underscores the development of tension in the poem.

The first use of *galdralag* occurs in stanza 13. Loki has pointed out to the gods that they are under obligation to accept him back into their banquet, despite Bragi’s expressions of unwillingness. Bragi then attempts a reconciliation, to which Loki replies with the first personal attack of the poem, and the first stanza in *galdralag*:

Iós oc armauga mundu æ vera

beggia vanr, Bragi;

ása oc álfa, er hér inni ero,

þú ert við víg varastr

oc sciarrastr við scot. (st. 13)

[Both horses and arm-rings you’ll always be short of, Bragi; of the Æsir and the elves who are in here, you’re the most wary of war and shyest of shooting.]

The seventh line is basically a variation of the sixth and adds nothing new to the insult. But this very fact indicates that the form of the stanza must be the bearer of the meaning associated with the magical power invoked by the sudden change to incantation meter. The use of the magical stanza strengthens the effect of the insult and helps Loki gain a superior position. Loki has already marred the sanctity of Ægir’s hall with the murder of Fimafeng, as recounted in the Prologue, and he is in need of additional strength if he is to remain in the hall. Loki’s magic seems to have the desired effect, for although Bragi is angered anew, he only sets himself up as the target of a new insult. Thus Loki’s power and the helplessness of the gods are simultaneously established. From then on Loki proceeds to attack all the other gods in turn.

Idunn and Gefjon both try to minimize the threat which Loki presents to them: Idunn by withdrawing herself and her husband from the fray, Gefjon by attempting to make light of Loki’s earnestness. It is at this point that Odin, seeing that things are getting dangerously out of hand, attempts to quell the arguments before they spread farther. Loki rebukes Odin, and calls his ability to judge such affairs into question. Odin’s reply is an attempt to equal Loki and to outdo the latter’s magic with a metrical *tour de force*. The addition of an eighth line is the poet’s way of showing Odin’s efforts at stronger magic:

Veiztu, ef ec gaf, þeim er ec gefa né scylda,

inom slævorom, sígr:

áttir vetr vartu fyr iqrð neðan

kýr mólcanði oc kona,

oc hefir þú þar born borit,

[You know, if I gave what I shouldn't have given, victory, to the fainthearted, yet eight winters you were, beneath the earth, a woman milking cows, and there you bore children, and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert.]

Odin first accepts his own shortcomings, in order to remove any grounds for further arguments on that point. He then accuses Loki of extreme sexual indecency, intimating that the sin and shame associated with a male god's bearing children and committing other feminine acts are worse than Odin's seemingly unfair dispensation of justice on earth. The eighth line embodies Odin's judgment of Loki's behavior. Odin wants to point out to Loki that his life is so flawed that he has no right to criticize others of lesser sins. But Loki is not silenced. He cannot be beaten on his own level even by the god of magic. Here he is superior, for this magic is used out of malice. In this the poet seems to recall and recognize the power which Loki has held for so long over the gods. Loki proves this power in his answer to Odin, in which he accuses the god of similar misdeeds, as well as charging him with the kind of black magic usually associated with women (*seiðr*): “Enn þic síða kóðo .../ oc draptu á vétt sem vǫlur ...” [But you once practiced *seið* and you beat on the drum as witches do] (st. 24). Loki succeeds with his much simpler stanza in doing what Odin could not accomplish with a far more elaborate one. It is Odin who is silenced, and Loki underlines his defeat by repeating the eighth line of Odin's stanza, thereby increasing the insult. That Loki would presume to touch Odin's authority is a sure sign that the old world-order is about to give way. In the end only Thor's hammer, not Odin's imitation of Loki, is able to defeat the slanderous god.

Loki's abuses continue unchecked until Sif, afraid that Loki will tarnish her reputation as well, tries to bribe him with kind words and a cup of mead:

Heill ver þú nú, Loki, oc tac við hrímkálki,
fullom forns miaðar,
heldr þú hana eina látir með ása sonom
vammalausa vera. (st. 53)

[Welcome now, Loki, and take the crystal cup full of ancient mead, you should admit, among the children of the Æsir, that I alone am blameless.]

Unlike the other gods and goddesses, Sif is not so much concerned with preserving the sanctity of the hall as with saving herself. Her guilt seems obvious in her thinly disguised plea for mercy. Loki realizes that her kindness only masks fear and resentment and disappoints her by accusing her of having been unfaithful to her husband Thor. In the seventh, or *galdralag*, line, Loki magnifies her crime by pointing out that he himself had been her paramour. There is no real reason for Loki to have to resort to magic against Sif. She is particularly helpless since her husband and protector is absent from the banquet. But it is obvious that Loki is only using her to attack Thor—

something which his reference to their affair proves he has done before. Loki uses one of Thor's many names (Hlórriði) and contrasts it with his own in the last two lines of the stanza: ... "hór oc af Hlórriða,/ oc var þat sá inn lævisi Loki" [your lover besides Thor, and that was the wicked Loki] (st. 54). Thor is not present and therefore out of the range of Loki's insults, and so Loki turns to magic to reach the one god left unchallenged by his taunts.

It would seem that Loki's magic is stronger than he might have wished, for as soon as he speaks these words, the serving woman Beyla announces the approach of Thor from the east where he has been harrying giants. The poet has used Loki's incantation to conjure the god into Loki's presence. This idea is strengthened by Beyla's repetition of the name for Thor which Loki has just used: "Fiðll ǫll sciálfa,/ hygg ec á for vera/ heiman Hlórriða ..." [All the mountains shake; I think Thor [Hlórriði] must be on his way home] (st. 55).

Beyla recognizes that Loki has summoned Thor, although perhaps not exclusively through the strength of his magic. In his words to Sif, Loki has broken the very laws which he has relied upon to gain entrance into the hall. Sif, in offering Loki the mead, revives the guest-host relationship which Loki had invoked upon his return to the banquet. Despite her insincerity, she puts herself into the position of the host. It appears for a moment as if Loki will acknowledge her position, since he takes the cup from her. But he does not go on to accept the responsibilities which accompany the guest-host relationship. We have already seen that Thor represents the gods' single-minded sense of justice. For this reason, too, his entry is appropriate at this point. When Loki's evil nature becomes most disruptive to the society of the gods, Thor, as the antithesis to that evil, is quite naturally drawn to it in order to combat it.

When Loki sees that he cannot keep Thor at bay for long, he resorts to magic again (st. 62), taunting him in *galdralag* as he did with Bragi. But even this does not protect him from Thor's continued threat, and he finally admits defeat. As he turns to leave, he addresses Ægir with the last *galdralag* of the poem. Significantly, this *galdralag* stanza, the very last stanza of the poem, acts as a kind of seventh line to the entire work.

Until this point there has been a regular shift of speakers throughout the poem, with the speaker changing every time the stanza changes. But the poet here ascribes to Loki two stanzas in succession. Only when Loki first enters the hall is there a similar succession of verses. Structurally the poem has come full circle. Now Loki, in a sense, dismisses all the gods, just as they seem to be ridding themselves of him. Without allowing them to reply, he goes far beyond the intensely personal and petty accusations which have characterized his speech until this point. He curses his host and shows that his hatred of the gods has grown to such an extent that only the final destruction of them and their world can satisfy it. Just as before he conjured up Thor, he now attempts to summon the end of the world, the dreaded Ragnarok:

Ǫl gorðir þú, Ægir, enn þú aldri munt
síðan sumbl um gora;

eiga þín ǫll, er hér inni er,
leiki yfir logi,
och brenni þér á baki! (st. 65)

[Ale you brewed, Ægir, and you will never again hold a feast; all your possessions which are here inside—may flame play over them, and may your back be burnt!]

This last stanza is the culmination of all Loki's past deeds, since it anticipates the last and greatest harm he can inflict upon the gods. His connection with the Ragnarok is even hinted at in the word "logi," the fire of doomsday, surely a play on Loki's name.

The gods have always known about the coming of Ragnarok, but Loki's curse points out how close at hand it is. As H. M. Heinrichs has said: "Doch die Ragnarök können nicht mehr fern sein, wie ja der Name selbst und Dinge, die mit ihnen zusammenhängen (Fenriswolf, Freyrs fehlendes Schwert), unheildrohend mehrfach in dem Gedicht erscheinen."¹⁴[However, Ragnarok can no longer be far off, since the name itself and things connected with it (Fenrir the wolf, Frey's missing sword) appear frequently and ominously in the poem.] As with the arrival of Thor, it is not only the power of Loki's magic which precipitates events, but the extent to which evil has infiltrated the world and brought it to its doom.

The poet, then, uses the figure of Loki to unify *Lokasenna*, and the character of Loki dominates the poem. He is malicious and ruthless in his ability to find ways of hurting the gods, but the poet has prepared us for that. At the beginning of the poem Loki asks the servant Eldir what the gods are talking about in his absence. Eldir replies that they are boasting of their prowess in battle and their great deeds, but that no one has a kind word for Loki. Loki then takes the subjects which Eldir mentions as the basis for his subsequent insults: "iǫll oc áfo færi ec ása sonom, / oc blend ec þeim svá meini miǫð" [(strife and) quarelling I'll bring to the Æsir and thus mix their mead with malice] (st. 3). This is the purpose which he mentions as having accomplished in stanza 64. He wishes, he says, to insult the gods and to direct his insults to those qualities of which they are the most proud. He wants to show the gods that they are not as brave, not as worthy as they themselves feel that they are. Along the way he will point out to them that they have not always considered him their enemy, since he is, among other things, Odin's blood brother and the lover of several of the goddesses.

Eldir replies that the gods will not tolerate his insults, but will 'smear them back on him' ["á þér muno þau þerra þat"] (st. 4), since, as becomes apparent in the poem, it is well known that Loki is the originator of many of their misdeeds. Loki is thus forewarned; and when Odin, Njord, and others attempt to indicate the baseness of Loki's own character, he is able to turn the insults back at them. He boasts to Eldir: "auðigr verða mun ec í andsvorom" [I'd be rich in replies] (st. 5), by which he means that he would be victorious in any battle of words. He apparently succeeds in this threat as he silences one god

after another.

But critics have viewed Loki's exit in different ways. Hollander suggests that he is victorious: "Though it is not stated, Loki's curse may be thought to have been fulfilled, leaving him the victor."¹⁵ De Vries, on the other hand, thinks Loki is powerless: "Loki hat zwar das letzte Wort, aber das zeugt nur von blinder Wut, die aus dem Gefühl der Ohnmacht kommt."¹⁶ [Loki does indeed have the last word but it is produced only by blind anger that comes from a feeling of powerlessness.] In de Vries' opinion the Æsir triumph; and he believes this is shown by Thor's ability to dismiss Loki, despite his hold on the gods: "Was in der Odinswelt hingenommen werden kann, ist in der [Thors]weit frevelhaft."¹⁷ [What can be accepted in Odin's world is sacrilegious in Thor's world.] Further, we are told in the Epilogue that the threats mentioned by Frey and Skadi are carried out.¹⁸ Although the gods have been angered and humiliated, they never succumb to Loki's attempts to make them break the peace of Ægir's hall and come down to his level. They are still determined enemies of the evil which Loki represents. And even without flawless pasts, they intend to meet the doom which Loki will bring them with as firm a resolve as at any time in the past.

Between the vicious words of Loki and the tense restraint of the gods, the poet creates a mood of highly charged drama. It is not the drama of the battlefield which is common in skaldic poetry and which is the subject of the gods' boasts before Loki's return. The conflict is rather one of personalities caught between the excesses of the past and the threats of the future. The poet has taken a mere catalog of mythology and transformed it into a cohesive study of the world of the gods when their reign in the world is nearly over.

Notes

1. In Peter Andreas Munch, *Norron gude- og heltesagn*, rev. ed. by Anne Holtsmark (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1967), 128.

2. Anne Holtsmark, "Lokasenna," in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilder & Bagger, 1956–78), 10: 697.

3. "Loki ... und kein Ende," *Festschrift für Franz Rolf Schröder*, ed. Wolfdietrich Rasch (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959), 1–10 at 8.

4. *The Poetic Edda*, tr. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 90.

5. Hollander believes it was written by a Norwegian in the latter half of the tenth century. See *The Poetic Edda*, 90.

6. Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 89 [tr. John Lindow].

7. *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska forn-ritafélag, 1954), ch. 102, p. 264. [Tr. Robert Cook, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders Including 49 Tales*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) 3:1–220 at 124–5.]

8. Hollander, 90.

9. Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1941–2), 2: 121. [Tr.: shockingly impudent.]

10. Dumézil, 30 [tr. John Lindow].

11. All quotations from *Lokasenna* are taken from *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 4th ed. rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1962). [Translation from Ursula Dronke, ed. and tr., *The Poetic Edda*, II: *Mythological Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 333; elsewhere translations are supplied from Carolyne Larrington, tr., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).]
12. Stanzas 17, 20, 22, 26, 30, 32, 34, 38, 40, 46, 48, 56.
13. de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, 2: 122.
14. H. M. Heinrichs, "Lokis Streitreden," *Island: Deutsch-Isländisches Jahrbuch*, 6 (1970), 41–65 at 43. See also de Vries, *AL*, 2: 122.
15. Hollander, 103, note 58.
16. de Vries, *AL*, 2: 123.
17. de Vries, "Loki," 4.
18. Although the Prologue and Epilogue probably did not belong to the original work, their content is clearly anticipated in the body of the poem.

“Loki’s Mythological Function in the Tripartite System” [*Lokasenna*]

Jerold C. Frakes

Lokasenna and Loki

In this second essay relating to *Lokasenna*, Jerold Frakes discusses the poem in an attempt to delineate the nature of Loki as a god. He responds in particular to the structuralist mythological approach of Georges Dumézil, who argued on a comparative basis with other Indo-European mythologies for a tripartite division of divine functions. In Old Norse, these theoretical functions of sovereignty, warfare and fertility were fulfilled mainly by Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr, with other gods and goddesses variously aligned. Loki, however, clearly did not have a ‘functional’ role and Dumézil’s treatment of him, Frakes argues, is inadequate. Frakes goes on to suggest Loki plays an anti-functional role, accusing the gods in *Lokasenna* of failing to fulfill their functional duties and often embodying the very opposite of those functions himself. Frakes’ approach and conception, providing Norse evidence for specific, individualized godly functions, does not in the end rely on the validity of Dumézil’s theoretical framework.

The nature of Dumézil’s speculations as they developed over many years and in a wide array of publications, of which Haugen provides only a selection in English translation, has now conveniently been surveyed by Belier. He also records some of the scholarly reactions (most notably Page’s for the Norse application), which accuse Dumézil of overgeneralizing and often misinterpreting the evidence.

Frakes also surveys previous approaches to ‘the problem of Loki’. De Vries, for example, emphasized Loki’s roles as trickster (a type of figure perhaps best known from Native American mythology) and culture hero (a Promethean type who brings important cultural and technological assets to men [or more often in Loki’s case, to the gods]). More recently Liberman has taken issue with these characterizations. He points out (123, citing Ström) that scholars’ conceptions of Loki will vary according to which episodes they select as exemplary. Rooth emphasized a scene in Snorri’s *Edda* wherein Loki invents the fishing net (his best claim to being a traditional culture hero);

taken together with the fact that *lokka nät* in later Swedish dialects can mean ‘spider web’, Rooth concluded (somewhat infamously) that Loki was originally a spider. Liberman for his part emphasizes the tale of Utgarthilocus in Book 8 of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, together with an etymological explanation of Loki’s name as ‘enclosure’, to suggest that Loki at base was a keeper of the dead. Rather than attempting to reconstruct an originary form for Loki, Schjødt arranges details in mythic episodes involving Loki into a kind of biography. Swenson treats Loki as “the creature who transgresses boundaries” (73); in Kristevan psychoanalytic terms, the abject. Davidson returns to Loki’s role as a trickster; drawing mainly on Snorri but also on *Lokasenna* and Saxo, she concludes that Loki can be comic, obscene and mischievous but also chaotic and destructive, perhaps reflecting varying fashions in story-telling. Lindow explores folktale analogues for one such obscene tale, an episode in *Snorra Edda* in which Loki makes the giantess Skaði laugh by tying his testicles to a goat.

Paul Acker

Further Reading

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Loki's Mythological Function in the Tripartite System

Loki has attracted more scholarly attention during the past century than perhaps any other figure in Norse mythology, primarily as a result of his ubiquity and importance in the surviving mythological documents and the almost universally acknowledged ambiguity of his character (one of the few points on which scholars have been able to agree). Thus on the one hand, as Folke Ström has noted, Loki is “medelpunkten i en omfångsrik myt-skatt” [the middle point in an extensive storehouse of myths], and H. R. Ellis Davidson goes so far as to characterize him as the “most outstanding character among the northern gods, the chief actor in the most amusing stories, and the motivating force in a large number of plots.”¹ On the other hand, Jan de Vries remarks that “man ... der außerordentlich komplexen Natur dieser Gottheit nie ganz gerecht wird” [one can never completely come to terms with the extraordinarily complex nature of this deity].² Until recent decades the majority of Loki studies have focused on specifically philological topics, such as the possible (etymological) signification of Loki's name, precise catalogues of his attributes, or a definition of his “original” character. Among other recent scholars, Ström has criticized such studies for their narrow focus and inability to account for “die ganze mythische Persönlichkeit” [the entire mythic personality].³ Ironically, his own study often resembles those of his predecessors in its reduction of Loki to a simple hypostasis of Óðinn.⁴ De Vries also comments on the earlier state of Loki studies: “Diesen Deutungen haftet der Mangel an, daß sie nur eine Seite des so merkwürdig vielseitigen Gottes erklären und ihn also nicht als eine einheitliche Konzeption zu würdigen versuchen. Man muß das Problem von einer anderen Seite anfassen” [These interpretations are flawed by the fact that they explain only one side of this remarkably complex god and thus do not attempt to account for him as a unified conception. It is necessary to approach the problem from another perspective].⁵

The present analysis of Loki suggests a possible comprehensive interpretation of this complex figure by a somewhat different means than heretofore employed: it seeks to determine Loki's mythological function in the context of Georges Dumézil's theory of an Indo-European tripartite mytho-ideological paradigm, which consists of three *fonctions* [functions], each represented by one or more deities: (1) sovereignty, with the dual aspects of priestly activity (represented in Germanic by Óðinn) and arbitration of

juridical matters (Týr); (2) warrior/protector (Þórr); (3) provider of well-being, fertility, nourishment, and peace (Niðrðr, Freyr, Freyia).⁶ But such an undertaking requires radical modification of Dumézil's paradigm, since it has thus far proven unable to account for Loki. He is not a functional god in the Dumézilian sense, and thus despite the centrality of Loki's *literary* role in the surviving texts, he necessarily remains all but excluded from Dumézil's articulation of the *mythological* system as it is manifested in the Germanic corpus.

Dumézil's inability to integrate Loki into the system may be the most telling failure of his monographic study of the figure, although the study also is disappointing in its simple lack of attention to Loki *per se*. Dumézil focuses on the similarities in character shared by Loki and the Ossetic mythological figure, Syrdon. While he scrupulously avoids a strict identification of the two, his presentation nonetheless smacks of the now-disreputable Frazerian comparative method of identifying mythological figures across cultural boundaries, on the basis of often quite general, nonfunctional similarities in personality.⁷ Even so, C. Scott Littleton contends that *Loki* is perhaps the best sociological study of the figure, while at the same time he admits that the book offers little in terms of the development of Dumézil's overall thesis.⁸ In so arguing, Littleton not only demonstrates his own tendency toward an uncritical acceptance of Dumézil's arguments but also points up the most problematic aspect of Dumézil's theories in general: his sociologico-mythological analysis is based solely on his strictly and consistently *theoretical* "reconstruction" of Indo-European society on the basis of an interpretation of selected literary documents. As such it again strikingly resembles the Frazerian method of mythological study and the traditional philological method; but then one must note that Dumézil has never denied or apologized for the philological origins of his method.

Whatever one's evaluation of Dumézil's method, the study does little to articulate Loki's place in the system of either Germanic or Indo-European mythology. Besides the comparison to Syrdon, he offers the familiar characterizations of Loki as the dangerous, "intelligence impulsive" [impulsive intelligence] that easily goes astray and has destructive consequences; or Loki as a mischief-maker with a demonic aspect.⁹ This type of intelligence is contrasted with the "intelligence recueillie" [contemplative intelligence] of Hœnir who, despite Dumézil's attempts to elevate him, remains a minor, obscure god as he appears in the surviving texts (*Loki*, pp. 268–74).

Subsequent Dumézilian studies have fared no better. De Vries concludes, "Wenn wir den Charakter des Gottes, wie er in den genannten Mythen hervortritt, zu bestimmen suchen, bemerken wir zu allererst, daß er ein verschlagener, unheilstiftender Gott ist, der seine Ränke sowohl gegen Götter wie Dämonen ausübt" [When we attempt to define the character of the god as he appears in the myths mentioned, we notice first of all that he is a cunning,

mischievous god who practices his schemes on both gods and demons]; he is a trickster-god, and in his role in the murder of Baldr, he is “ganz eine Satanische Gestalt” [entirely a Satanic figure].¹⁰ Anne Holtsmark, who incorporated some aspects of the Dumézilian approach into her excellent work on Scandinavian mythology, remarks “[Loki] spiller hoffnarrens rolle hos gudene. Han sørger for skjemt ved et gilde, fåxr gudene til å le a v hverandre” [Loki plays the role of the court jester among the gods. He provides for entertainment at the feast, makes the gods laugh at each other].¹¹

Although he never attempts to integrate Loki into the tripartite system, Dumézil does, however, briefly suggest the god’s relationship to it by simply denying him a “functional” role: “Loki est ... un dieu sans culte, autant dire un dieu sans fonction” “[Loki is a god without a cult, needless to say, a god without a function] (*Loki*, p. 17); and again: “à la différence d’Odinn et de Tyr, de Thôrr, de Njördhr et de Freyr, Loki n’est pas le patron d’une ‘fonction’ régulière, nécessaire (ce qui explique qu’il ne reçoive pas de culte), mais il illustre, pour une part, une ‘situation’ tellement fréquente et naturelle qu’elle pouvait passer pour nécessaire et régulière” [unlike Óðinn and Týr, Þórr, Njǫrðr and Freyr, Loki is not the master of one of the functions that is regular and necessary (which explains why he had no cult), but in a certain sense he illustrates a ‘situation’ so frequent and natural that it could pass for necessary and regular] (*Loki*, p. 267). At another point early in the work, Dumézil again mentions Loki in connection with the term *fonction*; but the context does not make clear if the use of the term is general or specifically in the Dumézilian sense of a mythological function, and no more is said of it (*Loki*, p. 21). The external deficiencies in Loki’s divine trappings—no cult, no temples, no place names—are obviously manifestations of this same negative phenomenon: a nonfunctional role in the religion.¹² Even so, de Vries’s argument (*Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 266) that without evidence of a cult it is impossible to define the character of a god since the only basis would then be the fragmented and thus insufficient myths that survive (unless one adduces supplementary material from, for instance, Ossetic culture), is unconvincing.

Despite Loki’s lack of a specific mythological function, Dumézil does not deny him a significant ancillary role for, as he notes, societies of openness and disputation (such as the Norse and Ossetic) demand a character such as Loki or Syrdon to give bad counsel, criticize, and tease (*Loki*, pp. 255–56). Loki’s “intelligence impulsive” is in turn constantly in demand by the functional gods, and it is also always feared because of its destructive powers. If Loki works within divine society, then he brings an element of fantasy, fertility, and life; danger is not completely absent, but Loki is not essentially harmful. If Loki operates alone, outside of divine society, however, then he endangers everything (*Loki*, p. 272).

Dumézil’s interpretation of Loki is thus not the epoch-making breakthrough on a small scale that his thesis of the Indo-European tripartite system

was in a larger context, as he himself notes: “Le ‘problème de Loki’ n’est pas tout à fait épuisé” [The ‘problem of Loki’ is not quite fully resolved] (*Loki*, p. 289). De Vries similarly remarks: “die Ausführungen Dumézils [sind] nicht alle ganz überzeugend und in mancherlei Hinsicht eigentlich nicht zu Ende geführt” [Not all of Dumézil’s explanations are fully convincing and in many respects not fully explored] (“Loki ... und kein Ende,” p. 2); and Betz comments: “auch Dumézil hat das Rätsel Loki nicht gelöst, aber er hat es der Lösung ein erhebliches Stück näher gebracht” [Even Dumézil did not solve the riddle of Loki, but he did bring us considerably closer to a solution] (“Die altgermanische Religion,” p. 1609). To have done that is, however, in itself sufficiently laudable, and it also sets strict and modest limits on the aspirations of the present study. As will be immediately apparent to the reader of the following pages, many scholars have contributed details to the present analysis, but without expressing it in its integrated form or placing it in the larger context of Germanic religion.

Without an integral place (a necessary place, in view of his ubiquitous importance in the myths themselves) in significant relation to the tripartite system, Loki remains merely a structurally peripheral figure who can be defined simply in terms of his relations with minor figures such as Hœnir. Dumézil’s inability to integrate Loki into the tripartite system may be less a deficiency in his argument, however, than it is an overly restrictive construction of the interpretive paradigm. Moreover, one might see Loki’s inevitable marginality in Dumézil’s attempted analysis as a reflection of his essential marginality in the mythological structure itself. As a nonfunctional, unworshipped god, he inhabits only the margins of the mythological system, just as he inhabits only the margins of the mythological realm: despite his ubiquity in the myths, he plays only an adjunct role to that of the functional gods. He does not inhabit Ásgarðr in the same way as do the Æsir, yet he has freedom of movement within this and other realms (where he is, however, also not at home). He is unrelated to the gods by blood and yet he is Óðinn’s blood brother, and like Óðinn he is of giant ancestry. He is apparently not invited to the feast in *Lokasenna*, but he is not excluded from it when he nonetheless appears (that is, until he commits an offense which cannot be tolerated; and even then he is later allowed to return).

In attempting to come to terms with Loki as a functional element in the mythological system, his essential marginality may well be the key. He is external to the system but essential to its function, and thus it is as a mediator between the outside and inside, partaking of both, that he operates. While they do not explore the implications of the idea, both Dumézil and Haugen obliquely touch on an important ancillary concept. In a discussion of *Lokasenna*, Dumézil notes that Loki’s attacks on Óðinn and Týr are directed specifically to their failure to perform their individual tasks.¹³

Einar Haugen briefly addressed this same aspect of Loki’s character in an article that displays as little sympathy for the Dumézilian method as it does an

ability to leap over its own structuralist shadow. Haugen's tacit assumption of and insistence on the universal applicability of the (Lévi-Straussian) structuralist tenet of binary oppositions often results in a reductive distortion of the evidence. One might note somewhat facetiously, though not altogether inaccurately, that Haugen is as blinded by his incessant search for binary polarity as Dumézil is by his quest for triads.¹⁴ In passing, however, Haugen makes the significant comment that "Loki is in many ways a negative replica of Óðinn, his fosterbrother, just as he is a companion of the giant-like Þórr, and sexually more than a match for the *vanir*. He caricatures and subverts all the divine functions He is the necessary antagonist in the divine drama."¹⁵

The kernel of the solution to "le problème Loki" may lie in the further development of the oblique, marginal suggestions by Dumézil and Haugen. Especially in the *Lokasenna*, but also in other texts, Loki lacks a Dumézilian function only insofar as his essential function is the manifestation of an anti-function; and as such he has three aspects, derived from the three functions. As scholars have often noted, Loki embodies certain aspects of the (functional) gods to the extent necessary to caricature them;¹⁶ he undermines their functional roles through diversion, theft, opprobrium, and ultimately destruction. His mischievousness, like his Satanic nature, his habits as a thief, and his murderous deceptions, all arise out of his nature as anti-function.¹⁷

As Betz points out, *Lokasenna* provides us with Loki's finest scene, and for the purposes of the present study the clearest evidence of his anti-function. Here he not only shows himself to be the archenemy of the gods in general,¹⁸ but he also assails the gods individually by attacking their mis-performance of their functional roles. Dumézil simply remarks that Loki's insults are all the more effective since they are in part accurate ("Deux petits dieux," p. 1) and notes that *Lokasenna* still reflects a devout belief in the pagan Scandinavian religion on the part of the poet (*Loki*, pp. 157–58), since he can see the comic, unvirtuous side of the gods. One might also add: since it presents the gods in their functional roles and Loki as their necessary subverter.

While treated the least extensively in *Lokasenna*, Loki's attacks on the first function are direct and the subversive intent is clear. He attacks Óðinn's salient characteristics as representative of the first function, first for his treacherous betrayal of his subordinates:

Pegi þú, Óðinn! þú kunnir aldregi
deila víg með verom;
opt þú gaft, þeim er þú gefa scyldira,
inom slævorom, sigr. (st. 22)

[Be silent, Odin, you never know how to apportion honour in war among men;
often you've given what you shouldn't have given, victory, to the faint-hearted.]

Then Loki attacks Óðinn for his perversion of his priestly practice of magic *in bono* [for good], by actually practicing it *in malo* [for evil]:

Enn þic siða kóðo Sámseyo í,
oc draptu á vétt sem vǫlor;
vitca líki förtu verþiód yfir,
oc hugða ec þat args aðal. (st. 24)

[But you once practised *seid* on Samsey, and you beat on the drum as witches do, in the likeness of a wizard you journeyed among mankind, and I thought that the hallmark of a pervert.]

Óðinn admits to the first charge (st. 23); Frigg does so for him, more or less, with respect to the second (st. 25). It is also of importance that Óðinn is characterized as *ragr*, engaged in female magic, in contrast to his legitimate function; thus he, like Loki, is a part-time transsexual, and like Loki he is promiscuous: neither Óðinnic trait can be accounted for in terms of the third function or an anti-function.

Nonetheless, Loki's own behavior often resembles the negative aspect of Óðinn's perversion of his functional tasks: his evil spells are alluded to by Freyia (st. 31), and his shape-shifting and black magic are implicit throughout the poem. Elsewhere, especially in Snorri's *Edda*,²⁰ they are described in more detail: his mutation into a mare (*Gylfaginning*, 25); a salmon (*Gylfaginning*, 36); a falcon (*Skáldskaparmál*, 3); a woman who elicits information from Frigg about Baldr's vulnerability; and a giantess who refuses to weep for Baldr and thus condemns him to remain with Hel (*Gylfaginning*, 35).

Loki also mentions the second aspect of the first function in his attack on Týr's function as arbiter and guarantor of justice:

Þegi þú Týr! þú kunnir aldregi
bera tilt með tveim;
handar innar hægri mun ec hinnar geta,
er þér sleit Fenrir frá. (st. 38)

[Be silent, Tyr, you can never deal straight with people; your right hand, I must point out, is the one which Fenrir tore from you.]

In an ambiguous way, Loki's entire harangue in *Lokasenna* begins with an attack on the second function, for his attack on Bragi (st. 13 and 15) is directed at the god's prowess as a warrior. While Bragi is not the most appropriate god to belittle in this regard, and since he is not usually associated with the second function²¹, here as elsewhere in the poem the fast-paced dialogue of attack and rebuttal is impelled by its own momentum. Since Bragi is the first to speak after Loki's return and discovery of the current topic of the gods' conversation—their martial prowess—Loki's insult is formulated accordingly. The attack on Byggvir also obliquely relates to the attack on the second function since in tone and vocabulary, if not in ultimate signification, it alludes to Byggvir's deficiencies as a warrior (st. 43–45). Yet Dumézil rightly points out that the exchange is a protracted series of puns on the name Byggvir (barley), and is thus to be more closely associated with function three

(“Deux petits dieux”).

The primary attack on the second function is, of course, directed at its major representative, Þórr, and it is detailed and comprehensive, the lengthiest exchange in the entire poem. Characteristically, Þórr’s reaction to the disturbance of equilibrium in Ásgarðr is with his hammer. Here, however, he merely threatens its use (st. 57, 59, 61, 63), rather than casting it immediately as is his custom. Alternating with Þórr’s refrainlike threat, Loki points out instances of Þórr’s failure as a representative of the second function: his (future) failure to protect Óðinn from Fenrir at Ragnarǫkr, his putative cowardice in hiding from Skrýmir inside the giant’s glove, and finally his weakness in being unable to open Skrýmir’s packstraps.

Elsewhere, Loki subverts Þórr’s performance of his function much more concretely by depriving him of the instruments of his function: he contrives to have Þórr go to Geirrǫðr without his hammer, belt of strength, or gauntlets (*Skáldskaparmál*, 26). In *Prymsqvíða*, Loki does not seem to be directly responsible either for the theft of the hammer or for Þórr’s disguising himself in bridal attire as Freyia, but his involvement is nevertheless significant, almost to the extent that his involvement in the episode of the building of Ásgarðr was culpable. When Þórr awakes to find his hammer gone, his immediate response is to summon the eternal suspect, Loki, who later informs the gods of the hammer’s theft by the giants and seconds Heimdallr’s suggestion that Þórr disguise himself as Freyia in order to retrieve the hammer. The ambiguity of his involvement in the entire episode emphasizes rather than weakens the suspicious nature of his role. Finally, the humiliation that the hypermasculine Þórr suffers in bridal costume resembles the kind of disgrace usually imposed on Loki himself as punishment for his mischievous escapades. Thus here too Loki manages to double a functional god, this time not by imitating the god, but by obliquely contriving to have the god imitate him.

Loki’s attacks on the third function are initially directed against Iðunn:

Þegiðu, Iðunn! þic qveð ec allra qvenna
vergiarnasta vera,
síztu arma þína lagðir, ítrþvegna,
um þinn bróðurbana. (st. 17)

[Be silent, Iðunn, I declare that of all women you’re the most man-crazed, since you placed your arms, washed bright, about your brother’s slayer.]

Here as elsewhere in the poem, Loki subjects the deities’ sexual practices to a radical distortion and subversion of the principle that underlies the third function: it is necessarily the case that fertility gods and goddesses, by their very nature, be and have the reputation for being sexually active. Loki decontextualizes and defunctionalizes this trait by either emphasizing the adulterous or incestuous nature of that activity or by reducing its functional complexity to mere promiscuity or sexual perversion: he does so for Gefion

(st. 20), Frigg (st. 26), Freyia (st. 30 and 32), Niðrðr (st. 34 and 36), Freyr (st. 42), Skaði (st. 52), and Sif (st. 54). In the course of his tirade, Loki is shown to have doubled the role of the gods, for he has been at least as sexually active or perverse as any of the deities he attacks. As Óðinn points out: “oc hefir þú þar born borit, / oc hugða ec þat args aðal” [and there you bore children, and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert] (st. 23), again noted by Niðrðr (st. 33); Týr’s wife was Loki’s lover (st. 40), as were Skaði (st. 52), Sif (st. 54) and by implication Freyia (st. 30). Snorri reports on other such activities by Loki, such as his seduction of the stallion Svaðilfœri (after having taken the form of a mare), subsequently giving birth to Sleipnir (*Gylfaginning*, 25), or his siring of the monstrous offspring Hel, Miðgarðsormr, and Fenrir. Thus his sexual prowess and promiscuity are at least as pronounced as that of the other gods, but they are of a radically different character, for the ostensibly promiscuous behavior of the gods can only be viewed in a *functionally* positive light, since that behavior is in fact demanded by their role as fertility deities and since the “result” of the deities’ sexual activity is the birth of divine offspring. Loki’s promiscuity on the other hand does not derive from any representation of the third function and is thus simple promiscuity, often with perverse, destructive motivations and corresponding results, especially in the case of his cosmos-threatening offspring. Thus in both word and deed, Loki subverts the principles of the third function.

Moreover, Loki regularly attempts to render the third function ineffective by destroying or defunctionalizing its representatives. He cuts Sif’s hair, the symbol of her fertility (*Skáldskaparmál*, 44); he is accomplice to Iðunn’s kidnapping and the theft of her youth-giving apples, thus rendering the Æsir subject to rapid aging (*Skáldskaparmál*, 1–3); he steals Freyia’s necklace Brisingamen, symbol of her function as fertility goddess;²² by his machinations Freyia is subject more than once to being given over to the giants (in exchange for the building of Ásgarðr [*Gylfaginning*, 25]; by implication in *Prymsqvíða* [st. 8] in exchange for the return of Þórr’s hammer). Yet the prime example of Loki’s subversion of the third function is his abnegation of his own genitals in a tug-of-war with a goat, in order to make Skaði laugh (*Skáldskaparmál*, 3).

Thus far reference has been made to examples of Loki’s subversion of the three functions in *Lokasenna* and in other mythological texts, insofar as they are concrete manifestations of his opposition to each of the individual functions. There are three episodes, however, in which this function as anti-function looms larger, is more pervasive, and comprehends all three functions. His cutting of Sif’s hair leads to his conciliatory provision of the gods with the six gifts (*Skáldskaparmál*, 44): Draupnir and Gungnir for Óðinn; Miðllnir for Þórr; Skiðblaðnir and Gullinbursti for Freyr; and the hair of gold for Sif. Thus Loki not only functions here as a subverter of the functions—especially in cutting Sif’s hair and attempting to spoil the work of Eitri and Brokkr while they are forging the second set of gifts—but he is in fact solely responsible for

providing the gods with the instruments and symbols of their mythological functions.²³ He is the grantor and the subverter simultaneously; he functions as the former so that he might function as the latter, now and later.

Ultimately, Loki's subversion of the divine functions is most clearly manifested in his role in the murder of Baldr, who in some senses represents all three functions, and in his role and that of his offspring in Ragnarǫkr. Baldr incarnates the major aspects of all three divine functions: (1) he is the wisest of the gods (also said of Óðinn, chief representative of function one) and best in counsel; he has priestly/magical powers insofar as he sees into the future in his dreams (*Baldrs draumar* and *Gylfaginning*, 33); his name may well be the Germanic appellative "lord."²⁴ (2) He is courageous, as seen in the martial kennings assigned to him in later tradition (e.g., Skjaldar Baldr, fólk-Baldr [shield, battle-]), and in Frigg's threat to Loki in *Lokasenna* (st. 27) that he would not escape unscathed were Baldr present. (3) He is the fairest of the gods. His representation of function three is the weakest link here, especially after de Vries has definitively refuted the claims of the *naturphilosophische* interpretation of Baldr as a vegetation god.²⁵ In killing Baldr (or conspiring as *ráðbani* [conspirator to murder] to have him killed), Loki destroys the representative of all three functions, and moreover subverts the functions in the abstract as well, for neither Óðinn's sovereign power nor Þórr's martial prowess can prevent or exact vengeance for the murder; the well-being of the entire race of the Æsir is subverted, since they had not yet known death among their ranks.

In the final battle, Loki's opposition to the gods takes its ultimate form. According to Snorri, Loki leads the forces of evil that destroy the mythological cosmos, and his offspring destroy the representatives of two of the three functions: Fenrir kills Óðinn, the Miðgarðsormr kills Þórr and Garmr kills Týr.²⁶ Had Loki killed Freyr instead of Heimdallr in the final battle, Loki and his offspring would have been responsible for the final destruction of all three functions and the present thesis would gain significant evidence; but such is not the case.

Yet his conflict with Heimdallr is not without significance in precisely this context, for in a certain sense, Heimdallr like Baldr represents all three functions:²⁷ (1) he lives in Himinbjörg, he sees into all the worlds, and like Óðinn he possesses wisdom and the powers necessary for its acquisition. (2) Like Þórr he is the *vorðr goða* [guard of the gods] (*Grímnismál*, 13; *Lokasenna*, 48) against the giants. (3) Like Baldr he is "white"; like the Vanir he is associated with the sea (born of nine mothers who are waves of the sea; cf. *Hyndlolióð*, 35 and 37); he is the progenitor of the three classes of mankind (*Rígsþula*; cf. also *Völuspá*, 1); he can see into the future *sem vanir aðrir* [like the other Vanir] (*Prymsqvíða*, 15); like Freyia ([in her alternative name] Mardöll), he has a name ending in *-dall* (bright), and he conceives the plan to save Freyia from the giants (*Prymsqvíða*). He then fights to regain the stolen Brísingamen from Loki (*Haustlǫng*). Like Loki, Heimdallr lacks both a

cult and any prominence in place names. He too is located at the margin of divine society: he is born in the beginning, *í árdaga* [in the primordial period], and *við iarðar þrǫm* [at the ends of the earth] (*Hyndlolióð*, 35), and is the last god to die (*Gylfaginning*, 38); he lives on the border of Ásgarðr, beside the bridge Bifrǫst (*Hyndlolióð*, 35). Thus, in killing Heimdallr, the last god remaining at Ragnarǫkr, Loki becomes responsible for the deaths of both of the other trifunctional deities, Heimdallr and Baldr, and succeeds finally in destroying the functional gods both in actuality and in principle.

Seen in terms of its diachronic development, Loki's placement on the margin of the system may well be due to his late inclusion in the Germanic pantheon.²⁸ No functional role in the system was either open to or particularly appropriate for him; nor was the role of the openly antagonistic force available. It was filled by the giants, and perhaps already by Fenrir and the Miðgarðsormr, whose existence is due, in the extant literary documents, to the "mediation" of Loki, their sire.

While Loki's anti-function is not perfectly consistent in all respects, such consistency is ultimately unnecessary in order to integrate Loki's basic traits into a unified character whose function is that of anti-function, set against the functional gods and the mythological system as a whole.²⁹ He is a thief, a trickster, a demon, a foulmouthed party-guest, and the ultimate nemesis of the gods. In each instance of these various levels of antagonistic behavior, Loki manifests his essential mythological function as anti-function. And as such his role is necessary to complete the semiotic structure of the mythological system. For it is only by means of an anti-function that the functions are ultimately delimited and defined; it is only by means of the margin that the center is defined. Loki defines the functions in a number of ways, simultaneously as their tester and usurper, subverter and destroyer. On the margin, he has equally ambiguous ties to the realms both of the gods and of the giants, but he is at home with neither.³⁰ His offspring are also creatures of the margin, whether literally—Hel rules (one of) the realm(s) of the dead; the Miðgarðsormr surrounds the disc of Miðgarðr; Fenrir is bound and imprisoned—or merely figuratively, as a result of their monstrous natures.

Residing on the margin separating the Æsir from other mythological beings, Loki mediates between them in both a positive and negative sense but he belongs to neither. He mediates between the gods and dwarves (when he arranges, and attempts to spoil, the gifts) and between the gods and giants. Haugen's designation of Loki as the "neutralizer" of the polarity of gods and giants does not well represent the actual nature of Loki's role, however, since he does not eliminate the hostility between the giants and the gods (Haugen says giants and "men," but must mean gods, since giants have little to do with men), which culminates in and is sublated with the mutual destruction of the conflicting parties at Ragnarǫkr. Yet even here Loki does not function as a neutralizer; he is a combatant on the side of the giants.³¹

To an even greater degree than is the case with respect to the giants, Loki

represents the eternal antagonist, the essential Other, for by his partial participation in divine society, while at the same time being in most respects (especially functionally) excluded from it, he is firmly enmeshed in the classic double bind characteristic of the sociological tension between center and margin. He is still similar enough to the other gods to mirror their functions in his own contorted glass, returning recognizable but distorted images, providing comment on and criticism of their misperformance of their functional roles and serving a subversive, and ultimately destructive, anti-functional role in the mythological system.

Notes

1. Folke Ström, *Nordisk bedendom: tro och sed i förkristen tid* (Göteborg: Akademieförlaget-Gumperts, 1961), pp. 116–17; see also his *Loki: Ein mythologisches Problem*, Göteborgs Universitets Årsskrift, 52.8 (Göteborg: Elanders, 1956), p. 6; and H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 176.
2. Jan de Vries, “Loki ... und kein Ende,” in *Festschrift für Franz Rolf Schröder zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Wolf Dietrich Rasch (Heidelberg: Winter, 1959), p. 10.
3. Ström, *Loki*, pp. 8–9.
4. See Ström, *Loki*, esp. p. 85; on Loki as subverter of Óðinn’s function and thus in a restricted sense a kind of inverse “Hypostase Óðinns,” see below.
5. Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1956–57), II, 265; see also de Vries’s critique of Ström (“Loki ... und kein Ende,” p. 2). For a survey and analysis of previous interpretations, see de Vries, *The Problem of Loki*, Folklore Fellows Communications, 110 (Helsinki: Societas scientiarum fennica, 1933), pp. 10–22; his “Loki... und kein Ende”; and John Lindow’s recent survey in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica*, 45 (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985); and the older but still useful survey by F. S. Cawley, “The Figure of Loki in Germanic Mythology,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 32 (1939), 309–26.
6. Dumézil’s basic thesis of a pan-Indo-European mythological structure that mirrored the culture’s tripartite social structure was most clearly expressed in his *L’idéologie tripartite des Indo-européens*, *Latomus: Revue d’études latines*, Collection Latomus, 31 (Brussels, 1958).
7. Georges Dumézil, *Loki*, *Les Dieux et les hommes*, I (Paris: G. P. Maissonneuve, 1948).
8. C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 89.
9. Dumézil, *Les dieux des Germains*, *Mythes et religions*, 38 (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1959), pp. 58 and 62.
10. De Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 262. But see also his earlier opinion that Loki was more antagonistic to giants and demons than to the gods (*The Problem of Loki*, pp. 145–50).
11. Anne Holtsmark, *Norrøn mytologi: Tro og myter i Vikingtiden* (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1976), p. 155.
12. Cf. Werner Betz, “Die altgermanische Religion,” in *Deutsche Philologie im Aufriß*, ed. Wolfgang Stammer (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1962), III, 1609.
13. Georges Dumézil, “Deux petits dieux Scandinaves, Byggvir et Beyla,” *Nouvelle Clío*, 4 (1952), 7; it should be noted, however, that he does not identify the object of Loki’s attack

as the divine *fonctions* as such, but rather as each of the gods' *domaine propre* [own domain].

14. Einar Haugen, "The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians: Some Thoughts on Reading Dumézil," in *To Honor Roman Jakobson*, Janua Linguarum, Series maior, 32 (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p. 863.

15. Haugen, "The Mythical Structure," p. 863. See also Philip N. Anderson, "Form and Content in the *Lokasenna*: A Re-evaluation," *Edda*, 81 (1981), 224: "[Loki] wishes ... to direct his insults to those qualities of which they [i.e., the gods] are most proud." [Anderson's essay is reprinted in this volume. Eds.]

16. Noteworthy in the present context is also Karl Weinhold's *natur-philosophische* thesis, developed in the first major published study on Loki ("Die Sagen von Loki," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 7 [1849], 1–94), that Loki's essence lay in his embodiment of the elemental entities, fire, air, and water. The superficial relationship of these three elements to the three Dumézilian functions is apparent.

17. In discussing Loki's relationship with Týr, Régis Boyer employs a similar formulation, without dealing with its larger implications, or attempting to define Loki's specific relation to the divine functions: "c'est... l'anti-dieu, une manière de pendant négatif ou de figure parodique inverse" [it is the anti-god, a sort of negative counterpart or an inverse parodic figure], *La religion des anciens Scandinaves* (Paris: Payot, 1981), p. 134.

18. Ström, *Loki*, p. 17. Most recently on *Lokasenna*, see the structuro-narra-tological analysis by Heinz Klingenberg, "Types of Eddic Mythological Poetry," in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 134–64. H. R. Ellis Davidson, in her article in the same collection, strangely dispenses with *Lokasenna* in three brief sentences, although it would seem central to her topic: "Insults and Riddles in the *Edda* Poems," *Edda: A Collection*, pp. 26–27.

19. *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, Vol. I, *Text*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 5th ed. rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983); subsequent references are to this edition. [Translations supplied from Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).]

20. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Gyldendal/Nordisk Forlag, 1931). Subsequent references are to *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*.

21. On this enigmatic god, see de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 273–74.

22. *Húsdrápa*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal/Nordisk Forlag, 1912), I, 128–29.

23. De Vries notes significantly concerning Loki's favors for the gods: "nie schafft er die nützlichen Sachen aus eigenem Antrieb und mit segensreicher Absicht, aber immer wird er dazu gezwungen" [never of his own accord or with good intentions does he make the useful articles; he is instead always forced to do so] "Loki ... und kein Ende," p. 9; see also de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 258, where he refers to the gifts as symbols only of the "drei göttliche Mächte" [three divine powers] and not of the three divine functions, but the context of his discussion nonetheless suggests that he is in fact speaking of the functions.

24. Cf. De Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 222. See also de Vries, "Der Mythos von Balder Tod," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 70 (1955), 41–60, and Dumézil, *Loki* (German ed., tr. by Inge Köck [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959], pp. 194 f. [revising the French ed., pp. 238–41]) on Baldr's function; de Vries emphasizes Baldr's warrior aspect and Dumézil his sovereignty, both as reflections of those aspects of his father, Óðinn.

25. De Vries, "Der Mythos." See F. R. Schröder's response, "Balder-Probleme," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* (Tübingen), 84 (1962), 319–57.

26. Cf. Jens Peter Schjødt, "Om Loke endnu engang," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 97 (1981), 76 and 78, on the role of Loki's offspring at Ragnarǫkr as the gods' *hovedmodstandere* [chief adversaries]. The present suggestion assumes for the moment that Garmr and Fenrir are at least functionally identical; de Vries has nonetheless rather convincingly refuted Eckhardt's thesis that Garmr and Fenrir are in fact the same creature

(*Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 19). That Surtr, unconnected with Loki, kills Freyr (third function) restricts the otherwise consistent nature of this illustration of Loki (and his offspring) as anti-functional destroyers of the functional system.

27. The literature on Heimdallr is vast; see esp. Birger Pering, *Heimdall, religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Verständnis der altnordischen Götterwelt* (Lund: Gleerup, 1941); Jan de Vries, "Heimdallr, dieu énigmatique," *Études germaniques*, 10 (1955), 257–68, and *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 238–44; R. M. Meyer, "Beiträge zur germanischen Mythologie," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 23 (1907), 245–56; Georges Dumézil, *Les dieux des Indo-Européens*, Mythes et Religions, 29 (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1952), 104–105). Dumézil's initial interpretation of the god as the Janus-like representative of beginnings was revised in "Remarques comparatives sur le dieu Scandinave Heimdallr," *Etudes celtiques*, 8 (1959), 263–83, in order better to account for his complexity of character. My brief characterization of Heimdallr here is not intended to be a complete analysis of this enigmatic deity, but rather merely a suggestion of the similarity of his tri-functional role to that of Baldr on the one hand and that of Loki on the other.

28. On this diachronic development, see most recently Schjødt, "Om Loke," esp. pp. 80–84, who takes little account of Dumézil's theories in seeking a historical development of Loki's character from the gods' "helper" to their "chief antagonist," through the course of a posited general degeneration of the "quality of life" in the mythological realm.

29. Were we to require strict consistency in the functional behavior of the other gods, they too would have to be stripped of their functional designations.

30. Spatially he is also marginalized, bound in a remote cave. Loki, as necessarily a resident of the margins of divine society, is discussed by Betz, "Die altgermanische Religion," p. 1609; and Littleton styles Loki the "little man" who is oppressed by his superiors and resents his inferior position in Ásgarðr, which results in his antisocial behavior (*The New Comparative Mythology*, pp. 88–89).

31. The functional role of the giants seems in general more complex than has heretofore been acknowledged.

“Reading *Brymskviða*”

Margaret Clunies Ross

Brymskviða

The plot of *Brymskviða* is simple and the poem well-structured; artful repetitions build to two climaxes, one comic and one violent. Þórr awakens one morning to find that his hammer, Mjöllnir, is missing. Loki determines that it has been stolen by the giant Þrymr and will not be returned unless Þrymr is given Freyja as a bride. Although Freyja has a reputation for promiscuity, she will not lower her standards so far as to marry a giant, and so the gods dress Þórr as a woman and send him/her to Þrymr accompanied by Loki who is also in drag, posing as Þórr's serving-maid. The hammer is brought out to sanctify the marriage in giantland and thus Þórr is able to seize it and destroy the giant threat.

How are we to read a poem in which the most manly of the gods, red-bearded Þórr, dresses up, albeit unconvincingly, as a woman and sets off to marry a giant? Should we view the poem as a late, post-Conversion burlesque in which the pagan gods are made to look ridiculous? Damico argues for a purely parody and farcical effect; McKinnell (1995) also reads the poem as comic. Or is the cross-dressing part of a ritual act of inversion, imbued with cultural significance? Does Þórr's loss of his hammer symbolise a loss of masculinity, a threat to the power that keeps the forces of chaos at bay? Clunies Ross here, and in the other works cited below, has argued that the underlying structure of *Brymskviða* matches that of other myths in which the gods venture into the realm of the giants to retrieve a lost valuable (e.g. a kidnapped goddess such as Iðunn) or go on a raid to obtain a valued cultural good, such as when Óðinn gains the mead of poetry for gods and men. McKinnell (2000) reads the poem in Jungian terms as therapeutic, centering on the loss of social and sexual identity and their recovery through personal courage, exercise of the will and reconciliation between the sexes. Other scholars have identified analogues from other cultures and commented on the presence of Þórr's hammer as evidenced in archaeological finds (Perkins) or in later folklore (Davidson, Puhvel). Lindow (1988) notes the emphasis in

skaldic poetry on Þórr's battles against female giants, which may explain's focus on the destruction of Þrymr's sister rather than the giant himself. Lindow's 1994 article surveys the meaning of the hammer in the Old Norse mythological system; it is the only implement of the gods which humans crafted for themselves, suggesting a connection with smithing and linking the poem with *Vǫlundarkviða*, which follows it in the Codex Regius, and providing a transition to *Alvíssmál*, since dwarfs are traditionally the smiths of Old Norse myth. Taylor also notes the parallels in both theme and structure with *Vǫlundarkviða*, suggesting that both poems might have been reshaped by the compiler at the manuscript stage.

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Reading Þrymskviða

Þrymskviða, named for the giant Þrymr rather than his divine adversary in the

poem, the god Þórr,¹ is one of the best-known poems of the Elder Edda collection. It has been much anthologised in Scandinavia and in other Western European countries including the English-speaking world.² The poem's modern popularity was clearly anticipated in the Middle Ages, both in the Icelandic *rímur* tradition and in ballads from Norway, the Faroe Islands, Sweden and Denmark. We may thus speak of an uninterruptedly appreciative reception of this poem from the Middle Ages to the present day in Scandinavia. Outside Scandinavia, too, the poem has been popular with those who have become acquainted with Old Norse literature, and it is easy to see why. *Þrymskviða* represents a single mythic narrative, told in economical and dramatic style, something that appeals to modern readers brought up on narrative fiction, but something in fact rather rare in Old Norse poetry.³ The poem is a sophisticated literary creation: it is spare but telling in its representation of the characters of the gods and giants, which are revealed through both their actions and their words. Its economical use of dialogue to further the action and present character has always been praised by critics. It draws on its medieval audience's and our modern knowledge of the Norse mythic world and its inhabitants; they knew and we know that a state of 'negative reciprocity' existed between giants and gods.⁴ Each group was out to gain an advantage over the other, not by an orderly exchange of natural and cultural goods or of women in marriage, but by subterfuge and trickery. At the same time, in the chronological period of Norse mythic history when these actions take place, in what I have called 'the mythic present' (Clunies Ross 1994a, 237–8), the two groups are hierarchically unequal, with the gods dominating the giants. It is Þórr's job to keep the giants in subjection by physical force and the threat of death, which he often administers by bringing his hammer Mjöllnir crashing down on giant skulls. He is both strong and brutal when necessary, and he does not respect oaths or legal agreements. As the god Loki is made to say ruefully, at the end of *Lokasenna*:

enn fyr Þér einom mun ec út ganga,
Þvíat ec veit, at þú vegr. (64: 4–6)

(yet I will go outside for you alone, because I know that you will fight [*or kill*].)⁵

The composer of *Þrymskviða* plays on well-known traits of gods and giants in constructing the narrative action and its dénouement. The giant Þrymr, lusting like all giants after the gods' women, is out to get the goddess Freyja for his wife; this is something he knows would normally be denied him by the gods. Therefore he needs to devise a stratagem to put the gods, and Þórr in particular, at a disadvantage; he does this by stealing Þórr's hammer as it lies beside him while he is asleep. The stolen hammer then becomes a bargaining point with the gods: Þrymr will give Þórr his hammer back if he gets what he really wants, the goddess Freyja as his bride. The rest of the action depends upon stereotypical reaction and counter-reaction on the part of each group.

The gods cannot bear 'their' Freyja to pass out of their control and she protests rather too much about the damage her reputation for sexual respectability will suffer if she goes to giantland as a bride.⁶ Since sending Freyja to Þrymr is unthinkable, the god Heimdallr has the bright idea that Þórr can dress up as a bride, with the epicene Loki as 'her' maid, and fool the giant into bringing out the hammer in a traditional marriage ritual in which the instrument was required to consecrate the bride.⁷ It was the custom to place the hammer on the bride's lap; Heimdallr's plan was evidently hatched to take account of the expected nature of this rite. After the divine bride's inappropriately masculine behaviour almost gives the show away, the anticipated sequence of events occurs: the hammer appears, Þórr snatches it up and smashes the skulls of both the giant, Þrymr, and his grasping sister, who has been itching to get her hands on the 'bride's' dowry.

Another reason for the continuing appeal of *Þrymskviða* is its brilliant comic action, which works for us on several different levels and presumably did the same for its medieval audiences. In the first place the comedy is of a situational kind, but the full absurdity of Þórr's dressing up as a bride and travelling to giantland to 'marry' Þrymr depends upon our awareness of the transgressive nature of this action within societal expectations of the norms of sexual identity and of male and female behaviour, as reflected in Old Norse myths. The mythic narrative of *Þrymskviða* challenges such societal norms in a manner not dissimilar to the confusion and problematisation of gender roles in much of Shakespearean comedy, where cross-dressing is an integral part of the mechanics of the plot. *Þrymskviða* probes these issues by means of a startling plot which begins when a giant strips the sleeping Þórr of the symbol of his virility and his masculine identity, an action which threatens both his own honour and status and that of the gods as a group. In order to recover Mjöllnir, Þórr has to act out his own féminisation so that he himself becomes the giant's 'bride'. Only when the marriage arrangements are about to be formalised through the ritual consecration with his own hammer placed on his apparently feminised lap can Þórr break the illusion, recover his hammer and his virility and strike back, on his own behalf and that of the gods. In this myth, though Þrymr comes perilously close to destroying the social fabric of the mythic world which keeps the gods in power, Þórr fights back and wins. The conclusion of *Þrymskviða* is thus satisfyingly positive for proponents of the social *status quo* and has no doubt contributed to its popularity both in medieval and modern society in reinforcing norms associated with male dominance and social hierarchy. The poem's enacted anxieties about sexual identities are dissipated in grotesqueries which make us laugh: Freyja's hall-shaking anger is absurd and flies in the face of what we know of her; Þórr's overde-termined masculinity as he eats and drinks voraciously and shoots fiery glances at his adversary Þrymr makes him as transparently manly as the cross-dressing male leads of British pantomime; Loki's successful impersonation of a quick-witted maid underlines his androgynous character.

We have to understand the normal characters attributed to this myth's protagonists if we are to relish their discomfiture and laugh at it. We need to know that Þórr is normally terribly manly, physically aggressive and very strong, with a large appetite for food and drink. He uses his hammer to keep the giants in order and to keep them away from the gods' women. Freyja, as we have seen, has something of a reputation for sexual promiscuity, while Loki is a shape-changer, often taking female form and in a few cases bearing children.⁸ Impersonating a woman is probably something he rather likes and is certainly good at, while for Þórr it is anathema: he is an inept drag queen, for he cannot conceal his masculine identity even under his bridal veil. Þrymr behaves just as a giant should, trying to subvert the supremacy of the gods by taking away Þórr's weapon of power and then bargaining with the gods to gain Freyja as his bride. She is horrified at the prospect of being sent off to giantland, not only because of the implicit loss of status it would bring, but because of the frequently-expressed belief attributed to the Norse gods that giants had unbridled sexual appetites and, to serve them, she would herself be required to behave like them.⁹ And of course she is such a proper goddess!

There is no doubt that the struggles between gods, giants and other beings in the world of Old Norse myths had their counterparts in the world of medieval human society, while the conceptual similarities between the world of Norse myth and that of commonwealth Iceland are striking.¹⁰ To comprehend the full meaning of the comic nature of *Þrymskviða*, then, and to understand the serious issues the poem grapples with, we must examine the unstated assumptions underlying the poem's actions and character relations, as well as the overt reasons for the protagonists' behaviour.

Let us first look at the comic mode itself in Old Norse mythology and what it may signify. It has been customary for scholars of Old Icelandic literature to regard *Þrymskviða* as one of the youngest poems of the Elder Edda collection, partly because of its comic treatment of its mythic subject. In the past there has been a tendency to consider that comedy in the literary presentation of the Norse gods was incompatible with religious belief in them as deities with real powers in the human world. Therefore, the more comic the presentation of a particular myth, the more likely the text in question was to be a composition of an age in which faith in the pagan gods was losing its credibility or had in fact largely lost it. There may well be something in this hypothesis, though it is usually difficult to test because most of our texts of Norse myths were written down in the Christian period in Iceland. The earliest manuscript to record *Þrymskviða*, the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, is usually dated to about 1270–80 on palaeo-graphic grounds (Heusler). We have no record of allusion to the myth or the poem in any earlier work, which is again a reason advanced by some scholars for suggesting it may have been the composition of an antiquarian mythographer of the Christian period during the twelfth or the thirteenth centuries.¹¹

Many of the extant literary treatments of Old Norse myths are comic in

nature, though they are by no means all as thoroughly burlesque as *Brymskviða*. Comedy is especially evident in myths that deal with Þórr's encounters with giants and with other unruly creatures such as the World Serpent (Miðgarðsormr) and the supernatural being named Útgarða-Loki. The question that then arises is whether, as John McKinnell has put it recently, "deliberate comedy arises only from the detached amusement of christian poets and storytellers, or was already inherent in the pre-conversion cult of Þórr" (1995, 143). Perhaps we should refer more exactly to comedy in the pre-conversion literary and artistic representations of Þórr, since we do not know the extent to which these were connected with religious cults. McKinnell's considered opinion is that there are indeed comic elements in myths about Þórr which are told in skaldic poetry that is usually regarded as having been composed in the pre-Christian age, "including not only exaggerations of Þórr's heroic strength and mockery of his giant opponents, but also some exposures of the god to embarrassment of various kinds. With the coming of Christianity, comedy seems to have become more pervasive in stories about Þórr ..." (1995, 146). This is also the conclusion of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1986 and this volume), who analysed a number of different versions of the myth of Þórr's fight with the World Serpent, in the context of Viking Age pictorial representations of this popular myth.

After the conversion to Christianity, myths about Þórr tended to include more comic and sometimes parodie elements; the purpose of the comedy was not to belittle or ridicule the god, but rather to reveal the limitations of divine power through his comic embarrassments and failures and, in McKinnell's words again, to bid "a wry farewell to Þórr as a god, an acceptance that he is, after all, no more than an enjoyable fiction" (1995, 180).¹² Whether or not the composer of *Brymskviða* was a Christian, it is certain that the compiler or compilers of the Codex Regius were. However, as I have argued elsewhere (1992) in connection with Snorri Sturluson's prose mythological fictions in his *Edda* (also often narrated in a comic vein), though people no longer believed in the Norse gods as part of their religious faith in thirteenth-century Iceland, they continued to use myths about them as a vehicle for a whole range of social and intellectual concerns. The gods and the conceptual world of Norse myth were part of the traditional culture of Iceland. It was not simply a matter of religious faith but of cultural recuperation that the old myths continued to have meaning in a Christian medieval context. In this sense, then, the comic treatment of Þórr's loss of his hammer and his subsequent recovery of it is likely to be part of a traditional approach to the subject of this myth, and not simply the independent invention of a thirteenth-century individual, as some scholars have surmised.¹³

In the late thirteenth-century form in which we have it, *Brymskviða* uses comedy to explore some of thirteenth-century Iceland's most profound social and intellectual concerns and some cultural anxieties surrounding them. These can be summarised as: interpersonal and hierarchical relationships between

men (Þórr and Þrymr) and their resolution through the control of women (Freyja); the nexus between social status and power of the group and the self-image of the individual; and the nature of male and female self-image and their definition. All these themes are familiar to readers of Old Icelandic saga literature. *Þrymskviða*'s plot tests the boundaries of these concepts and definitions, and it does so by means of comic exaggeration of character and situation. As Theodore Andersson has pointed out in a recent paper on *Egils saga*, caricature and overstatement are the hallmarks of Old Icelandic comedy. Þórr's situation in *Þrymskviða* is extreme; he loses his hammer while he is asleep, which deprives him literally of his ability to control the giants and symbolically of his virility. The plot therefore requires him to be feminised symbolically but to remain very clearly a male. Hence the comedy springs from our perception of the gross and absurd discrepancy between the symbolic and the literal: Þórr's characteristically masculine traits are exaggeratedly portrayed at the same time as his situation is most dire. Although his discomfiture is meant to be taken seriously and to focus attention on what it is that makes him a man, the gods know and we know what the foolish giants do not: that Þórr's most dangerous moment, when he is ritually consecrated as the giant's wife with Mjöllnir itself, is to be his moment of reconstitution as a male being.

Þrymskviða has a truly brilliant plot and incorporates a marvellous joke, but like all jokes it has its serious side. In reading a literary work of a past age, we need to bring to its understanding as much contextual information as we can glean from external sources that may help us to realise how individuals of its age of composition might have understood it. In this case, our understanding of *Þrymskviða* is assisted by contextual information about the myth type and structure of the poem; about the social world of Old Norse myth, as revealed by a general study of the mythic corpus; about Old Icelandic concepts of male and female behaviour, and of honour and shame. We also need to understand the symbolism of some of the characters' attributes and behaviour patterns.

Þrymskviða is one of a number of Old Norse myths about Þórr's encounters with giant antagonists and it seems likely that they were very popular with medieval Scandinavian audiences, for they outnumber most other myth-types in the corpus; they also inspired pictorial representations in many parts of the Viking world. Many of these myths assumed poetic form, and there are both eddic and skaldic examples. Snorri Sturluson gives prose versions of most of these myths in his *Edda* of c.1225, and in a few cases, such as the myth of Þórr's journey to the territory of Útgarda-Loki, he narrates myths that we do not know in poetic form. Oddly enough, Snorri makes no reference to the central myth of *Þrymskviða*. Nevertheless, its content and structure follow established patterns.

There are a number of extant myths in which Þórr encounters and struggles with supernatural beings who appear to represent natural forces that threaten the world with disorder. These beings include the World Serpent, or

Miðgarðsormr; the enormous and powerful Útgarða-Loki; and some of the god's giant opponents, among them Geirrðör, his two daughters and the giant builder who appears to offer his services to the gods in rebuilding Ásgarðr. Both male and female opponents feel the force of his hammer (Lindow 1988). Þórr characteristically defends the ordered world of gods and humans from whatever is perceived to threaten it, though he does not always have complete success in overcoming the opposition. His failures, his embarrassments and the oath-breaking he often resorts to are among the indications that the Old Norse gods, though resourceful, cunning and intelligent, dominate their opponents with difficulty, and in respect of chaotic natural forces, only for a limited period of time. Most of the gods, including Þórr, will die in combat with an assortment of monsters and fire-giants at *ragna røk*.

Drymskviða belongs to a sub-set of Þórr myths that examine one particular aspect of the gods' and divine society's vulnerability: their honour. I have earlier alluded to the way in which the gods retain their social dominance over the giants by refusing to let their own women marry giants. The sole exception to this unstated rule, which may nevertheless be inferred from a study of the whole mythological system (Schjødtt; Vestergaard), concerns the Vanir group. Having taken them into Æsir society after the first war in the world, their superiors are keen to preserve the Vanir's subordination by much the same means as they impose upon the giants: they prevent the male Vanir, Njörðr and Freyr, from taking Ásynjur brides, while they themselves enjoy Freyja's sexual favours without paying for them through marriage (Clunies Ross 1994a, 95–101). The Æsir thus marry endogamously among themselves, the Vanir males marry giantesses, while the giants either marry giantesses (about which little is said in the myths) or, most frequently, try to steal the gods' women. Thus the goddesses, whose circulation in mythic society was closely guarded, were the objects of intense desire on the part of the lowest-ranking males, the giants, who sought to obtain by prédation what they could not secure by exchanging women with the gods. This point of tension generated many important Old Norse myths and a high proportion of them involve Þórr.

I have argued elsewhere (1994a, 103) that the existence of a large number of Old Norse myths about negative reciprocity and breaches of social norms reveals a fascination on the part of medieval Icelandic society with stratagems of cheating and trickery, which we also find in the plots of Icelandic sagas. Interestingly but not unexpectedly, when we recognise that the gods are stalking horses for human social concerns, there are clear winners and losers in the negative reciprocity stakes: the gods always outsmart the giants. However, other dimensions of these myths blur the black-and-white character of that outcome and make them comparable to the myths which pit the gods against supernatural representatives of disorder, where the gods are shown not to be in complete control. Hence myths like *Dryms-kviða* do not only show an interest in the illicit for its own sake, in the thrill of the stratagem that almost

but not quite topples the system. They also explore the most sensitive site of divine vulnerability, the gods' honour.

There is an extensive anthropological literature on the importance of the concept of honour and its opposite, shame, as expressions of the social evaluation of individuals and groups within small-scale societies, where face-to-face personal encounters rather than anonymous means of social ranking determine a person's or a group's relative worth. I have recently (Clunies Ross 1994b) suggested that another of Þórr's fights with a giant named Hrungnir needs to be understood in the context of the dynamics of honour and shame societies, in which an individual male's concept of self-worth depends upon the ceaseless testing of his value as a man in comparison to other men and as a member of one particular social group in contradistinction to others. The concept of honour involves asserting an individual's own sense of self-worth and his value in the eyes of his society. Conversely, dishonour derives from actual or perceived threats to a man's value as an individual and a group member.

In honour and shame societies both men and women are considered to possess honour, but it is usually men who are charged with maintaining their own honour and that of their women. There is felt to be an intimate link between a man's honour and that of the women for whom he bears public responsibility; if his women are dishonoured, he is shamed. Furthermore, female honour is largely defined in terms of approved sexual behaviour. The dynamic of this aspect of male-female relations means that the honour of women depends on their engaging only in socially-sanctioned sexual activities; virginity is a sought-after attribute of brides and married women are required to be faithful to their husbands. Hence women's activities are usually closely invigilated by their male kin, whether husbands, fathers or brothers, because a violation of a woman's sexual integrity is thought to reflect directly upon the honour of the man who is her guardian. A family's honour in these circumstances may depend more on the sexual conduct of its women than on any other single factor; women are constrained in their behaviour but they also have power as the individuals whose actions have the capacity to maintain or destroy the family's reputation. Concepts relating to the notion of cuckoldry (Blok 1981; Brandes 1981) play in a variety of stereotyped ways on the nexus between the supposed sexual dishonouring of a woman and the direct shaming and weakening of her husband as a consequence of her illicit sexual activities. However, the general evaluation of men in such societies, in terms of how well they control other men's access to their women, extends more widely than to the figure of the cuckolded husband. A man's control of his sister or his daughter may be at stake as often as his regulation of his wife's sexual behaviour. Ultimately, a man's ability to control the women of his household is an indication of his manliness in other spheres of life and of his superiority to other men.

There is much evidence that medieval Iceland was an honour and shame

society. It was small-scale and individuals were very much dependent on their own efforts to establish their worth in the absence of externally sanctioned marks of social status and hierarchy (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 21; Miller, 29–34, 185, 303). Both saga literature and the medieval Icelandic law codes, as well as those of Western Norway, indicate that men were extremely sensitive to aspersions cast on their honour and usually responded to them with physical violence or with an act designed to humiliate their challenger. The preoccupation with male honour and its undermining is also to be found in Old Norse myth, to a greater extent than has yet been recognised, especially in myths of the sub-group to which *Pryms-kviða* belongs. This sub-group comprises several narratives in which Þórr is obliged to fight or kill supernatural beings, usually giants but in one case a dwarf, who have threatened his honour directly through the attentions they have paid to his wife Sif or his daughter Þrúðr. I have argued elsewhere (Clunies Ross 1994b) that the myth narrated in the eddic poem *Alvíssmál* is of this kind,¹⁴ as are the myth of Þórr and the giant Hrungnir. Also pertinent is a myth about Loki's sexual enjoyment of Sif while her husband was away from home, which is alluded to in *Lokasenna* and is probably behind the enigmatic mythic vignette told in Snorri's *Edda* about how Loki cut off all Sif's hair and was forced to replace it with a golden wig. *Pryms-kviða* is also about a challenge to Þórr's honour, as both Meulengracht Sørensen (1983, 23–4) and Perkins (1988 and 1994) have already established.

There are two main reasons why Þórr is so frequently involved in myths of this type. In the first place, he is above all the other gods the embodiment of divine virility, which is expressed both as physical strength and sexual potency. His hammer, Mjöllnir, symbolises this latter quality, and as Perkins (1994) and I (1994b) have shown by reference to the shape of surviving amulets and pictorial representations of Mjöllnir from the medieval period, its physical appearance was unmistakably phallic. In him the gods' honour and their virility come together; this congruence is expressed through all his bodily attributes: his physical strength, his flashing eyes, his power of movement, his long hair and beard and his tremendous appetite for food and drink.¹⁵ In the second place, Þórr is often away from Ásgarðr on giant patrol, and so his own women are vulnerable to abduction and rape. In *Prymskviða*, unlike the other Þórr myths of the subgroup, there is no immediate threat to the women of Þórr's nuclear family. Rather, Prymr robs him of his hammer Mjöllnir, which is both the weapon by means of which the god regularly keeps the giants in control and prevents them from enjoying goddesses and the symbol of his phallic power. This act, with which the poem begins, is both the direst threat to the physical safety of all the gods' women, and therefore a direct threat to the gods' honour and status, and a symbolic castration of Þórr himself. The loss of his hammer while he is asleep and in a passive state is the cause of shame, and would have been equated by medieval Icelanders with homosexual rape. The god is *ragr*.¹⁶

It is for these reasons that Þórr is in such a state of anger and consternation when in the first stanza he discovers that Mjöllnir has gone. It is for these reasons also that the whole of divine society rushes to find a solution to the crisis, first by sending Loki in Freyja's feather cloak ("fjaðrhamr") to discover where the hammer is and what Þrymr wants in exchange for it, and then, when the awful truth of the giant's plan to get Freyja as his bride in exchange for the hammer becomes known, by contriving to send Þórr and Loki to giantland in the guise of Freyja and her maid. We have already seen that much of the comedy of *Þrymskviða* turns on the discrepancy between Þórr's normal manliness and the absurdly unconvincing female impersonation he carries out. Once at Þrymr's hall, his enormous appetite and fiery eyes betray his real gender, even though the giant is too stupid to realise it and even though, as a joke beyond a joke, Loki explains these un-feminine qualities to Þrymr as manifestations of an excess of feminine desire for him which had prevented 'Freyja' from eating, drinking and sleeping (26: 5–8; 28: 5–8). On the other hand, Loki's very success at impersonating a bridesmaid suggests his bisexual nature.

The dénouement of *Þrymskviða* turns on the ceremony of hallowing the false bride with the real hammer, Mjöllnir, thereby giving Þórr the opportunity to recover his hammer at the very moment of his ritual féminisation. Perkins (1994) has argued that in all probability the head of the hammer would have been directed at the bride's reproductive parts by the male officiant at the wedding, in an action that mimicked sexual intercourse.¹⁷ He has also given a further depth of comic irony to the poem's final stanzas, for he has shown that the scenario here probably reflects medieval Icelandic representations of the seated Þórr holding Mjöllnir, such as we find on the Eyrarland image now in the National Museum of Iceland.¹⁸ In this image the hammer's head doubles as the god's genitalia and is placed on his knees. Hence, as Perkins puts it, "the unwitting officiant is, as it were, slotting the Þórr's manhood back where it belongs" (1994, 661–2). Furthermore, Þórr's act of taking his hammer back by presumably grasping it with both hands also mimics the action of the Eyrarland image, in which the figure clenches the shaft with prominent knuckles. If such images were at all widely known—and the likelihood is that they were conventional—the audience of *Þrymskviða* would have registered a sense of the completeness of things when they heard how Þórr got his hammer back: "Svá kom Óðins sonr endr at hamri".

Þrymskviða explores some of the weaknesses of divine society, which in its denial of reciprocal exchanges of women in marriage always strove to keep the giants at bay through the gods' strong man, Þórr. It shows how the gods' honour and status depended on Þórr's hammer, the symbol of his virility and the instrument with which he protected them and their women from marauding males and thereby ensured the retention of their dominant social status. The poem postulates what might happen if Þórr lost his hammer and then goes on to represent a successful counter-stratagem for its recovery,

which involves the god playing out his féminisation by transgressing (very reluctantly) normal gender roles. However, the poem not only allows the god to recover his hammer and his virility, but it also, through its very comedy, insists that Þórr himself had never really lost his manliness. For him, as indeed for Loki when he changes gender,¹⁹ the assumption of attributes of the opposite sex is a source of strength, in that these actions enable him to achieve what he wants. There is, however, a difference between Þórr on the one hand and Loki on the other. Loki is successfully bisexual, whereas Þórr's masculine identity is compromised but not obliterated by the loss of Mjöllnir. In *Brymskviða* the price of humiliation is success and the recovery of honour. By contrast, in Icelandic saga literature and probably in thirteenth-century society, the price of humiliation is usually dishonour. Thus mythic poems like *Brymskviða* do not enact human social *realia*, though they often present a changed and enhanced image of them for the appreciation of their audiences.

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Notes

1. The poem's title is found in the late thirteenth-century manuscript Codex Regius 2365 4to at the end of the first line of the *Prymskviða* text (fol. 17r, line 13). It means 'narrative poem (*kviða*) about Þrymr'. The technical term *kviða* is applied to other poems of the Codex Regius collection which have a largely narrative mode, e.g. *Hymiskviða*, *Völundarkviða*, *Atlakviða*, *Guðrúnarkviða*. The title follows another apparent convention perceptible in the mythological poems of the Codex Regius, and one which has been little commented on, as far as I know. It is that, where the poem deals with an encounter between a god and a giant (or a dwarf in one case, *Alvíssmál*), it is the giant's name and not, as might be expected, the god's, that is a formative element of the title. Examples are *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Hymiskviða*, *Alvíssmál* and *Hyndluljóð*.

2. It has appeared in school anthologies in Norway and Denmark until quite recent times (Magerøy 1958, 256). English-speaking students often study it in elementary Old Norse classes, for it appears in E. V. Gordon's *An Introduction to Old Norse*, first published in 1927.

It is item No. XIII in the 2nd edition (1957), pp. 136–141. The first competent English translation of the poem appeared in William Herbert's *Select Icelandic Poetry*, (1804), as "The Song of Thrym; or, The Recovery of the Hammer," pp. 1–34, though there is an earlier, much less accurate version by Amos Cottle in his *Icelandic Poetry* (1797).

3. Heinz Klingenberg has discussed the rarity of extended narrative poetry in the eddic corpus. Lindow 1982 points to the narrative dimension of skaldic verse. Apart from *Prymskviða*, *Hymiskviða* is the only other divine poem of the Elder Edda compilation which is predominantly narrative in mode, and there we find a certain amount of narrative embedding of other myths (for example Þórr's fight with the World Serpent Miðgarðsormr) within the main story-line of the quest of the gods Þórr and Týr for a giant-owned brewing cauldron. See Clunies Ross 1989 for an analysis of the narrative structure and the themes of *Hymiskviða*.

4. I have explained this 'negative reciprocity' (a term I have borrowed from the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins) in greater detail in my book *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society* (Odense, 1994), cited henceforth as Clunies Ross 1994a.

5. All quotations from *Prymskviða* and other poems of the Elder Edda are from the edition of Neckel and Kuhn, 1983. Translations supplied by the author.

6. There is no doubt Freyja's posturing in stanza 13 is to be understood as comic, if not burlesque. She claims she will get a reputation for being "vergjarnas-ta" (most crazy for men) if she goes to giantland. The fact is she already has that reputation, as numerous other references in Norse mythological texts attest. See, among others, *Lokasenna* sts. 29–32 and *Hyndluljóð* sts. 46–7.

7. We do not know very much about this ritual, which apparently formalised marriages in medieval times, but its operation is assumed knowledge for the poet and his audience. On this see Elgqvist, Bø and Perkins 1994, who gives a very plausible reconstruction of the ceremony. The symbolic significance of placing Þórr's hammer (or an image of it) on a bride's lap is discussed further below and in an article (Clunies Ross 1994b) on the honour of the gods.

8. For a summary description of Loki's feminised activities, see Simek, 193–7. His child-bearing is a mythological reflex of the Old Icelandic legal concept of *yki* or 'exaggeration' in the context of the general definition of *nið*, or defamation which has a sexual component. For a discussion of *yki*, see Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 16–17.

9. The clearest expression of this view in eddic poetry occurs in Skirnir's threats to the giantess Gerðr made on behalf of his master Freyr in *Skirnismál* sts. 26–36. Unless she agrees to become Freyr's bride, Skirnir says (st. 36.3–4), she will have only giants as sexual partners and be cursed with "ergi" (inordinate sexual desire), "æði" (frenzy) and "óþoli" (unbearable sexual torment).

10. In the last decade a number of studies have examined the fit between the Norse mythic world and that of human society, as represented in Old Icelandic literature. For the conceptual parallels, see Hastrup, 136–154 and Lindow 1994; on bloodfeud and Norse myth, Lindow 1995; on honour, especially as it relates to Þórr, Clunies Ross 1994b; on marriage Vestergaard; and for an extended study Clunies Ross 1994a.

11. A further argument in support of a late date for the composition of *Pryms-kviða* has been advanced by Alfred Jakobsen (1984 and 1993). Jakobsen finds many stylistic and verbal similarities between *Prymskviða* and other eddic and skaldic poems. One cannot deny that the verse is often put together from conventional, formulaic elements, but that is not necessarily to say that the presence of such elements should lead us to conclude that deliberate, literary borrowing has taken place. Whatever the age of the various eddic poems in the Codex Regius, it is likely that all will have undergone some form of oral transmission and textual variation before they were written down. It is difficult to use arguments about literary borrowing as a means of dating this kind of poetry. On the formulaic nature of eddic verse, see Harris (esp. 111–126), Kellogg, Quinn and Acker.

12. It is impossible to do justice to the complexities of McKinnell's arguments here. They

are also to be found as Chapter 3 of his 1994 book on change and variety in late Norse heathenism.

13. For example, Hallberg, who proposed Snorri as a possible author of *Brymskviða*.

14. [See also Acker in this volume. *Eds.*]

15. It is, of course, true that Óðinn is also associated with the concept of sexual potency, and that he is involved, far more than Þórr, in sexual adventures with giantesses that often result in the production of children. Óðinn, however, does not maintain the gods' honour as Þórr does, and he is not involved in keeping the giants at bay. Þórr expresses the protective and aggressive (to other males) aspects of male virility; Óðinn's sexuality is directed to other ends, including the provision of divine heirs and the acquisition of natural and cultural resources which the giants often own. The two gods' attributes are complementary.

16. The adjective *ragr* and its metathesised form *argr* mean 'sexually perverse (that is, the passive partner in a homosexual relationship), unmanly, cowardly'. When Þórr exclaims, as he is forced to dress up as a bride, "Mic muno æsir argan kalla" (the gods will call me unmanly; st. 17: 3–4), we perceive his statement as highly ironic, for he has already been made *ragr* at the outset of the action. This irony is underlined by the poet's use in the previous line of the epithet *Þrúðugr*, 'powerful, strong', to describe the god; that is his normal condition, certainly, but his strength has been diminished through the loss of his hammer. Perkins 1988 has pointed to another stinging indicator of Þórr's condition, the fact that Loki can use the neuter plural form of the numeral two, *tvau*, (the form used to refer to two persons of opposite gender) to refer to himself (still dressed as a male) and Þórr, attired in bridal gear (st.20: 5). In females, the counterpart to male *ergi* (the noun cognate with *ragr*) was expressed as nymphomania; hence Freyja's concern for her reputation in st. 13 if she should have to travel to giantland to satisfy Þrymr's lusts.

17. Perkins argues (1988, 660–1) that the officiant would most likely have been standing, so that the hammer would have been lowered from a vertical position onto the bride's lap. It is equally possible, it seems to me, that the officiant would have been stationed in front of the bride, holding the hammer towards her in horizontal position.

18. Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, inv. 10880.

19. There are a number of myths in which Loki changes gender, usually to extricate himself or the gods from trouble. He changes into a mare to lure the giant builder's stallion away from his task of rebuilding Ásgarðr, and later gives birth to the eight-legged horse Sleipnir. In the myth of the death of the god Baldr, as Snorri Sturluson tells it in his *Edda*, Loki assumes female form to find out from Frigg the secret of Baldr's invulnerability (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 49).

“The Context of *Vǫlundarkviða*”

John McKinnell

Vǫlundarkviða

Vǫlundarkviða is the only surviving poetic Norse record of a story that was known in Germany and England in the early medieval period: the story of Weland (Vǫlundr) the smith. The prose introduction and the first section of the poem, stanzas 1–6, tell of Vǫlundr, his brothers and the swan maidens they win for a brief time. The swan-maiden motif in *Vǫlundarkviða* differs from other European versions (see Hatto and Motz) in that the brothers do not constrain or coerce their brides, nor do they lose them through any transgression on their part but rather because of the bird-women’s instinctively migratory nature. The two brothers depart to seek the swan-maidens, leaving Vǫlundr alone when the greedy king Níðuðr attacks him, seizing his gold, hamstringing him and forcing him to work as a palace craftsman. The second part of the poem tells of Vǫlundr’s incarceration and subsequent revenge upon Níðuðr and his family. When Níðuðr’s sons come to view the precious rings Vǫlundr has made, he kills them, makes goblets of their skulls and sends these to their mother Bǫðvildr. When she in turn visits to have a ring repaired, he intoxicates her and impregnates her when she is asleep. Vǫlundr reveals all to Níðuðr, after which he flies away. Although the text offers few lexical difficulties, problems of interpretation remain: is Vǫlundr a human being (the son of a Lappish king) or an elf? (Dronke concludes he is a ‘mixed being’.) How does he fly away from his island prison? Some readers have assumed that the ring he regains enables him to change into a bird, perhaps a swan; others surmise that he fashions a coat of feathers (as described in *Velents þáttur* and perhaps depicted on the Franks casket); Dronke (265–7) suggests the spirit flight of a shaman.

Interpretations of *Vǫlundarkviða* as a whole have been concerned with two main areas. The first is the relationship between the two parts of the poem, where readers have found it difficult to integrate the swan-maiden theme with the tale of imprisonment and revenge. Taylor focuses on the verbal repetitions that link the two stories together, arguing that the poem follows the pattern of

a seasonal myth: the loss of a bride, the entry into winter and darkness with Vǫlundr's capture, and the recovery of potency with the regaining of the ring and sword (symbols of womb and phallus). Burson and Grimstad focus on the ring Vǫlundr made for his bride, the swan-maiden, then stolen by Níðuðr and given to Bǫðvildr; it causes her to fall under Vǫlundr's sway when she brings it to his smithy to have it repaired. Burson draws on Lévi-Strauss to suggest that two tales, separate but sharing underlying structural features, are fused in the poem. Grimstad interprets the poem as a straightforward account of the vengeance that a supernatural creature wreaks upon humans who underestimate his abilities, and as an initiation rite, in which Vǫlundr's mutilation endows him with renewed powers. Motz considers the poem to be a blending of stories concerning a hunter, a craftsman and a warrior, drawn respectively from northern Eurasian, early peasant and medieval European heroic traditions.

The second area of contention concerns the origin of Vǫlundarkviða and its relation to other versions of the same tale. A similar story was known in England, as evidenced in the Old English poem *Deor*, which refers to Weland and Beadohild (see Dronke, 276–80). King Alfred makes reference to Weland the smith in his translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. The Franks Casket depicts Weland and Beadohild in the smithy (reproduced in Dronke, 283), while in local Berkshire/Oxfordshire traditions a neolithic barrow is known as Wayland's Smithy, where it was said a phantom smith would shoe horses in return for a silver penny (Davidson). Dronke suggests a trajectory for the legends underlying Vǫlundarkviða, from Germany (where the story of Wieland the smith is recorded in *Friedrich von Schwaben* and *Heldenbuch*, and where the version translated into Old Norse prose as *Þiðreks saga* originated) to England; thence to Norway, where the swan-maiden prologue and the reforging of bodies into jewels motif was added under the influence of Lappish tradition; and finally to Iceland, where the swan-maidens were given royal, historical fathers. McKinnel's study, reprinted below, summarises evidence for an English origin, then continues with a close reading of the poem. He argues for the integration of the two sections and emphasizes the distinctive shaping that the original tale(s) have undergone in the Eddic version.

Carolynne Larrington and Paul Acker

Further Reading

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The Context of *Vǫlundarkviða*

[This article originally appeared in *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 23 (1990): 1–27; in this volume, the first half of it is briefly summarized, while the second half appears in full. For the detailed evidence on which my arguments about the provenance and date of *Vǫlundarkviða* are based, readers should consult the article in its original form.]

Much recent criticism of *Vǫlundarkviða* has concentrated on investigating the two archetypal stories on which its plot is based: that of the other-world swan maiden who is married by a mortal man but subsequently leaves him; and that of the vengeful smith who repays his unjust capture and maiming by murdering his oppressor’s two sons, making jewellery out of their skulls, eyes and teeth, seducing the unjust king’s daughter and leaving her pregnant, and telling the king of his revenge before flying away. Both stories are widespread, and the study of them has been useful; but it is possible to rely too heavily on the archetypes, and they have sometimes been used to construct arguments about what the poet of *Vǫlundarkviða* intended which are not supportable from the text of the poem itself. In this article, I want to turn back to two more traditional questions:

1. What can be said of the provenance and date of the poem?
2. What is distinctive about the way this poet tells the story?

I

Most opinion has placed the poet in Norway, supposing that he had either an Old English (OE) source (Bugge, Jón Helgason) or an Old Saxon (OS) one (Jan de Vries, Schröder). The following words and phrases certainly or probably show OE influence: “alvitr unga[r]” (young alien creature[s]) (sts.

1:3; 3:9; 10:7); “*ørlog drýgia*” (to suffer fate) (sts.1:4; 3:10); “*við gimfas-tan*” (firmly with a gem) (st.5:4); “*bast*” (bast-rope) (st. 7:5) and probably also “*bestisíma*” (bast cord) (st. 12:3), where the manuscript form “*bestibysíma*” is meaningless; “*álfa ljóði*” (prince or citizen of elves) (st. 10:3) and the related “*vísi álfa*” (lord or wise one of elves) (st. 13:4); “*nauðir*” (constraints) (st. 11:6); “*iarnasteina*” (precious stones) (sts. 25:2; 35:6); “*urn sofnaði*” (fell asleep) (st. 28:4, metrical pattern only); “*barni aukin*” (with child) (st. 36:6); “*níta*” (to experience) (st. 37:4).¹ These forms might be explained in any one of four ways:

1. Translation from an English source.
2. The use of English vocabulary by a Scandinavian poet to give an impression of the exotic.
3. Composition in a dialect area influenced by OE.
4. Composition in Scandinavia by an Englishman.

The last seems unlikely, and the second ignores the fact that English-influenced vocabulary is not used only in mysterious and exotic contexts; again, if this was the intention, the poet has failed to avoid the danger of being misinterpreted by Scandinavian audiences, as several misunderstandings by the prose editor and the scribe demonstrate (see “*alvitr*” “*gim*”, “*bestisíma*” and possibly “*nauðir*”, “*íviðgiarnra*” (literally ‘things eager for malice’, i.e. injuries demanding a malicious revenge?) (st. 28:8, “*níta*”). There are three grounds for rejecting the idea of a direct translation from an OE source: a surprisingly large proportion of lines (42 out of 158) whose alliteration cannot be derived from OE; two instances of prominent OE influence (“*alvitr unga[r]*” and “*um sofnaði*”) which could not be translated back into equally satisfactory OE verse; and points misunderstood by the editor and/or scribe (certainly “*alvitr*”, possibly also “*vísi álfa*” and “*níta*”) which result from the use of forms similar to the OE ones in words or word-elements where Norse forms do exist. These all suggest that the poet’s own speech and metrical practice were influenced by OE, and thus that he was composing in England.

There are also some signs of German (probably OS) influence: certainly some of the personal names (*Hlǫðvér*, *Níðuðr*, *Þakkráðr*, perhaps also *Niárar*, *Bǫðvildr*, *Vǫlundr*; see Jón Helgason, 27–9); and “*dró*” (st.2:6) used in the sense ‘wore’. Four phrases may show either OS or OE influence: “*íviðgiarnra*” (st. 28:8 MS *ívið giarira*); “*vel ek*” (hurrah for me) (st. 29:1); “*tenn hánom teygjaz*” (he snaps with his teeth) (st. 17:1); “*á fitiom*” (on webbed feet?) (st. 29:2, though in this case it is probably unnecessary to suppose any non-Norse influence at all). The stratum of German influence

suggests that the Anglo-Scandinavian poet was probably using an OS source, whether directly or indirectly.

Bugge suggested a northern Norwegian origin for the poem because of the poet's apparent knowledge of the Lapps (which is in fact based on common poetic tradition) and of northern landscape and wildlife (which are both pure romantic imagination). As soon as one looks at it closely, this evidence simply melts away. Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon has tentatively suggested an Icelandic origin, chiefly on the basis of the word "ǫgurstund" (literally 'the time of a tide', i.e. a fleeting interval of time) (st. 41:5), which appears in a variety of local usages in Modern Icelandic concerned with brevity and the state of the tide; however, this could be derived from or cognate with OE *egor* (tide, high tide).

We are left with the conclusion that the poem probably originates from a Norse-influenced area of England. To judge from the admittedly meagre epigraphic evidence, Old Norse does not seem to have been spoken for long in the southern Danelaw or the Five Boroughs area of the East Midlands; it appears to have died out in Yorkshire by the mid-eleventh century and in Cumbria early in the twelfth (see Page). But a group of at least four stone relief carvings of Vǫlundr survives, all clear examples being from West Yorkshire (Bailey, 105), while the fine tradition of Anglo-Norse carving in Cumbria shows no examples of the motif (and continental Scandinavia has only one, Ardre Stone VIII in Gotland [see Gustafson, *Gotlands Bildsteine* I, taf. 139, 140, II, 22-4 and fig. 311]).² We may therefore tentatively suggest that the poem is more likely to have been composed in Yorkshire, and hence to date from the period ca. 900 - ca. 1050.

II

I would like to turn now to the question of what is distinctive in the way the poet handles the story. It is of course of great value to know as much as possible about the major ancient archetypes which underlie the poem, but to study these is not to study the poem itself; it is the role of the historical anthropologist rather than the literary historian, and to confuse the two helps neither type of study. For example, Lotte Motz (55) argues that the final 'happy ending' in which Vǫlundr marries the king's daughter (as in *Þiðreks saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 1:115; ed. Bertelsen, 1:132-3) is an original part of the legend, and that Bǫðvildr acquires some of the characteristics of the swan-maiden bride whom Vǫlundr has lost at the beginning of the story. Her grounds for this argument are that the swan-maidens legend is commonly found as an ancestor myth, whereas the vengeful smith does not usually have descendants. Bǫðvildr's son Viðga is a legendary ancestor (probably the Gothic hero Vidigoia named by Jordanes in his *Gothic History* (ed. Mommsen, 65, 104; tr. Mierow, 62, 101; and see Hill, 6); therefore the story of Bǫðvildr must show influence from that of the swan maiden.

This argument seems to me to be dubious as applied to the archetype. No

surviving version of the legend equates Bǫðvildr with the swan-maiden bride, and we cannot assume a feature which is not in any version of the story merely in order to force the legend into perfect accordance with the archetype. Comparative mythologists can never be experts in every one of the languages and literatures they use, and if everyone started emending stories in accordance with supposed stereotypes, then the basis on which those stereotypes are founded would itself become unreliable. And as regards *Vǫlundarkviða* itself, such argument is valueless, for in this poem it is quite clear that the swan bride and Bǫðvildr are not the same woman, that Bǫðvildr becomes the mother of a son while the swan bride does not, and that the ancestor myth is in any case not what the poet is interested in.

What, then, was in the traditions received by the poet, and what has he chosen to alter? (Since the poem is characterised by an evident mistrust of the power of women, it is likely that the poet was a man.) It seems probable that he did not invent the connection between the story of the swan maidens and that of the vengeful smith, for the same connection is implicit in the versions of the German romance *Friedrich von Schwaben* which also call the hero Wielant (Jellinek, xviii–xix; Jon Helgason, 42). But there also two respects in which the story apparently depicted on the Franks Casket (of which Jón Helgason, 32–3 gives convenient illustrations) agrees with *Piðreks saga* against *Vǫlundarkviða*:

1. *Vǫlundarkviða* inherited a version of the story in which Vǫlundr had at least one brother (Egill) and possibly two, but he chooses to get these two brothers out of the way early on in the story by sending them off in search of their swan brides. In *Piðreks saga*, Egill continues to play an important part in the story, catching the birds from which Vǫlundr (Velent) makes the wings he will fly away with, and being forced to shoot at him as he makes his escape (ed. Guðni Jónsson, 1:112–5; ed. Bertelsen, 1:125–31). The Franks Casket also depicts a man catching birds behind the smith, and (in a version now obscure but apparently different from *Piðreks saga*) shows Egill as an archer defending a house against attacking warriors. Whatever the detailed meaning of this scene on the Franks Casket, it seems likely that Egill usually had a larger part in the story than the poet of *Vǫlundarkviða* has allowed him, rather than that the Franks Casket and *Piðreks saga* have independently expanded his role. (Further on Egill's fame as an archer, see *Piðreks saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 1:110–11; ed. Bertelsen, 1:123–4; and *Hemings Þáttur*, Fellows Jensen, cxix–cxxi.)

2. *Vǫlundarkviða* omits the maidservant who both in *Piðreks saga* and (probably) on the Franks Casket accompanies Bǫðvildr when she brings her broken ring to Vǫlundr and asks him to mend it (*Piðreks saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 1:109–10; ed. Bertelsen, 1:120–1). Souers has suggested (106–9) that the maidservant may only have been added by the author of *Piðreks saga*, and that the second female figure on the Franks Casket panel may be another representation of Bǫðvildr, sent by Vǫlundr to fetch the drink which he will use in seducing her on a second visit to him. This interpretation is possible, but it involves assuming the existence of a motif (Vǫlundr sending Bǫðvildr to fetch the drink) which is not found in any source, and it may therefore seem unlikely. The omission of the maidservant from *Vǫlundarkviða* may rather have been to avoid awkward questions about why she neither prevented the seduction of Bǫðvildr nor warned Níðuðr about it,

We cannot know whether the author of *Vǫlundarkviða* or his source was responsible for these changes, but they remain significant for the way the story is told.

Some other aspects of the story must be attributed to the poet rather than the source, and three of these seem particularly important:

1.
The suppression of the dynastic element in the story.
2.
The importance given to female characters.
3.
The attempt to assert exact poetic justice.

It is clear that the poet knows about Vǫlundr's son Viðga, since Vǫlundr refers to the possibility of a son when he forces Níðuðr to swear that he will not kill his 'bride' (st. 33). In any case, *Deor*, which seems to have some textual relationship to *Vǫlundarkviða*, uses the story of Beadohild (Bǫðvildr) as an example of sorrow which was eventually transcended (presumably by the fact that her son became a great hero). This story was probably widely known in England: *Waldere* (ed. Hill, 24) refers to Widia as both "Niðhades mæg" and "Welandes bearn" without feeling the need for further explanation (II, ll. 8–9). But our poet allows Bǫðvildr no consolation, and despite knowing about Viðga, is not in the least concerned with him, whether as ancestor, consolation or anything else. In this respect, the spirit of *Vǫlundarkviða* is quite different from that of *Deor*, and probably represents innovation by this poet.

One of the most interesting aspects of the poem is the importance given to female characters. The swan maiden's importance is brought out by a series of references to her and her sisters throughout the first half of the poem. Throughout stanzas 1–3, the emphasis is firmly on them rather than on their husbands. In st. 1 we see them settling on the shore as they do it, not as the men discover them. In st. 2 it is the women who take the initiative in the marriages, and this must have been very striking to the poem's first audience because it was unfamiliar in their own society (see Fell, 58; Wikman). And in st. 3 the swan women are possessed by an unspecified yearning, and the parting is due to an unexplained compulsion within them, something in which their husbands have no share and about which they are apparently neither consulted nor enlightened.

This is all very different from the usual form of the swan maiden archetype, in which it is the human man who initiates the marriage, often even compelling it by stealing the woman's swan-skin, as the Wielant figure does in *Friedrich von Schwaben* 11. 4389–4641 (ed. Jellinek, 67–71). In that form of the story, the woman's departure is understandable, sometimes even a

laudable escape (see Hatto, 333–4), whereas here it seems like arbitrary caprice, or at best obedience to natural laws that remain entirely inscrutable to human beings.

There is, however, another kind of story in which a woman from the other world, often a queen or princess, does take the initiative in wooing a mortal man. She is generally called the *fée* (*Hrólfs saga kraka* calls her an “álfkona”); Marie de France’s *Lanval* is a well-known example (58–74, and for its Norse form, see *Strengleikar*, ed. Cook and Tveitane, 212–27). A related *lai* which is closer to the *Völundr* story is *Graelent*, but this includes the episode in which the hero steals the bird-skins of the women, and thus makes him take the initiative; it has even been suggested by Schofield that it may have been influenced by a *Völundr* story like that in *Friedrich von Schwaben*, but Cross shows that it is not necessary to suppose this (ed. Grimes, 76–101, and a damaged Old Norse text appears in *Strengleikar*, 278–90; see also Schofield, 133–46; Cross, 621–2). Other stories of the same kind can be seen in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, (ed. Slay, 31–3; ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 2:25–7); *Gibbons saga* (ed. Page, 4–8); and see also Boberg, F300 and references there. Further Irish parallels are given by Cross. As most examples of this story-pattern in Old Norse seem to derive from romance tradition, to which it came chiefly from Celtic sources, there may be some doubt about whether Norse speakers in tenth- or eleventh-century Northumbria would have been familiar with it;³ but Scandinavian links with the Celtic areas of the British Isles, especially Ireland, were so strong that such knowledge cannot be considered unlikely.

This kind of encounter sometimes resembles the one in *Völundarkviða* in that it takes place in a remote natural place, and it also involves the human hero being temporarily abandoned by the *fée* later in the story. But the *fée* usually imposes a tabu on the hero, which he fails to observe. This is the reason for her abandonment of him, his subsequent misfortunes or both; and here *Völundarkviða* does not conform to the pattern, for the swan women place no tabu on their husbands, nor do the husbands do anything which might drive them away. The abandonment remains completely arbitrary.

Having lost the other-world wife, what should the hero do? Egill and Slagfiðr immediately depart in different directions to begin a search for their mates (st. 4), and this is what the husband in the swan maiden story often does (Hatto, 334, 351; Motz, 53). But we never hear any more of them, and one might be tempted to guess that searching for an other-worldly woman by wide journeying in this world is the wrong way to go about it. It might be argued that such heroes as Orfeo and Yvain do regain their partners by journeying; however, these stories normally involve an aimless wandering rather than a purposeful search, and a retreat into uninhabited wilderness rather than travel among different lands in the world of men; in the latter respect, they resemble the solitude of *Völundr* in *Úlfadalir* rather than the behaviour of his brothers. Anyway, we have here a story of three brothers, and we all know (and have

known ever since we had *The Three Little Pigs* read to us as children) that it is always the youngest brother, or the last mentioned, who adopts the right course of action. Staying put in such a situation is also more sensible in terms of this relationship; the human will not be able to find his supra-human mate against her will, and as the marriage was initiated and ended by her choice, it is only by her return, whether voluntary or compelled by magic, that it is likely to begin again. That is probably why Vǫlundr spends his time perfecting rings, whose completion seems to function as a symbol of female sexuality in this poem, as well as creating the idea of a chain magically binding the characters to each other. There is an apparent 'rightness' about this behaviour.

To this, however, one might add one qualification. If the forging of rings is a kind of magic by which the smith can induce or even compel a woman to come to him, the story partakes of another folktale irony: such magicians need not only power but also the wisdom to phrase their demands exactly. Just as the Wife of Usher's Well is able by means of a curse on the weather to compel the return of her dead sons, but forgets to stipulate that they must remain with her (Child, 2:238–9, no. 79), so Vǫlundr embarks on the ring-magic which will bring him a mate without, apparently, considering that the woman who comes may not be the same one that he has lost.

At all events, Vǫlundr immediately assumes first that his swan bride will come back if he waits in this way (5:7–10), then that she has actually done so (10:5–8). And it is this confidence which puts him off his guard and allows Níðuðr and his men to capture him in his sleep. When Níðuðr accuses him of possessing gold which should belong to the king himself, Vǫlundr reveals that the wealth comes from the swan women and that there was even more of it when all three brothers and their wives were together.

So far, the swan bride appears to have brought nothing but disaster to the hero. Having initiated the relationship and then ended it for reasons which remain inscrutable, she abandons him without his having offended any tabu, denudes him of the brothers who might have defended him and leaves him with a seemingly reasonable but empty confidence that she will return. This and the wealth abandoned with him make him an easy victim for Níðuðr's greed. One might argue that Vǫlundr breaks a tabu when he names the swan maidens to Níðuðr in explaining his right to the gold, as Lanval does when he mentions his fairy mistress in asserting that even the beauty of her handmaids is superior to that of Guinevere (*Lanval* 292–302). But there is nothing in the poem itself that implies this, and in any case it cannot explain why the swan woman has already abandoned the hero at an earlier stage. At most, it could only be taken as an indication that their relationship is now irrevocably at an end. There is no suggestion that the swan bride was motivated by a desire to harm the hero, merely that her motivation is inscrutable and takes no account of him. It may also be implied that his involvement with and reliance on her and on female magic have left him unfit for the real world. At all events,

having contributed so greatly to his disaster, she is ‘out of the story’, as the sagas say, being possibly referred to only once more, as the past possessor of rings now worn by Bǫðvildr (19:1–4). Even that reference is capable of a more ironic sense: ‘Now Bǫðvildr wears the red rings which denote my bride.’ If that interpretation is correct, it is a recognition by Vǫlundr that his ring-magic has brought him a different bride from the one he expected, and even, with a further irony, that in awarding his ring to Bǫðvildr, her parents were unwittingly handing their daughter over to the smith’s magic.

The second female figure brought into prominence by the poet of *Vǫlundarkviða* is the queen, Níðuðr’s wife. It is hard to be sure whether she figured at all in the received tradition, but I am inclined to think that she is not entirely the poet’s own invention. In *Friedrich von Schwaben*, the heroine’s enchantress stepmother Queen Flanea is responsible for many of the lovers’ problems, although the whole story of the vengeful smith is absent. The Gascon folktale cited by Jón Helgason (47–8) also includes a female villain, the Queen of snakes, though her role in this vengeful smith story is quite different from that of Níðuðr’s queen, except for the possible association with wild creatures in both, for the queen in *Vǫlundarkviða* may perhaps be the Queen of bears (see below). If, as I suspect, the British ballad “Lamkin” (Child 2:320–42, no. 93) is also a descendant of the Weland story (though not solely of *Vǫlundarkviða* itself, since it includes major roles both for the villain’s wife and for the maidservant), that would also suggest that the queen had a traditional role as opponent of the hero and participant in the wrongs done to him. But of course wicked stepmothers and the like are stereotyped folktale characters who could easily be invented independently, so the question must remain undecided. At all events, the importance and detail of character attributed to the queen in *Vǫlundarkviða* must be taken as part of this poet’s own design.

As soon as she appears, it becomes obvious that Níðuðr is not, like Atli in *Atlakviða*, the sort of tyrant who makes his brutal decisions unaided. The queen is observant, ruthless and vindictive, and it is she who advises that Vǫlundr’s sinews be cut in order to render him harmless (16–17). She points out the resemblance of his teeth to those of a snarling wild animal (however one translates “teygiaz” 17:1) and of his eyes to those of a snake (17:5–6). It is a curious reversal for Vǫlundr to be described in terms of the animals he used to hunt, and probably when the queen is later described as “kunnig” (25:3, 30:1, 35:7) the meaning is something more than ‘wise’ in an ordinary sense, though that sense does underline her role as counsellor (on the prevalence of the sense ‘skilled in magic’, see Cleasby-Vigfússon, 359). If “kunnig” means ‘skilled in foretelling the future’, it must be taken as partly ironic, since her perception that Vǫlundr is dangerous is not matched by a foreknowledge of his revenge. But it is also possible that we should take it to mean ‘skilled in magic’ (like *ffǫlkunnig*). If so, might she be in some sense patroness of the animals Vǫlundr hunts, perhaps related to the curiously

specific she-bear that he roasts just before he is captured (st. 9)? Such a relationship might also be suggested when her sons are repeatedly referred to as “húnar” (cubs) (sts. 24,32, 34; for “húnn” with the sense ‘bear’, see Hallar-Steinn, *Reksteffa* 13, and probably Víga-Glúmr, *lausavísa* 5, ed. Kock, 1:257, 64). In that case, transforming the hunter into the representative of a captured animal might be an appropriate revenge, though this is no more than a speculation, and not demonstrable from the text. What is unavoidable, if we take “kunnig” to mean ‘skilled in magic’, is that female magic, in whatever form, is again harmful to the hero.

The next reference is brutally ironic. After Vǫlundr has decapitated the two sons of the queen and Níðuðr, it is to her that he sends jewels made from the eyes of the boys (25:1–4). She is, after all, the observant one, so it is appropriate that eyes should be sent to her, and it was she who compared Vǫlundr’s eyes to those of a snake. She must be assumed to mean the comparison to be with the eyes of an actual snake, but in the hands of the smith it is as if they become the jewel-eyes of a serpent wrought in gold. It is even possible that we should take the gems attached to the rings in st. 5 as a foreshadowing of this.

The queen appears again in sts. 30–31. The action of walking along the length of the hall, which preceded her vindictive advice to lame Vǫlundr, is repeated before she asks Níðuðr if he is awake. But this time she is bluntly told that her advice is not wanted (or perhaps she is blamed for her past advice) in the phrase “kǫld ero mér ráð þín” (cold are your counsels to me) (31:6). This echo of the proverb “kǫld eru kvenna ráð” (women’s advice is cold; see Jón Helgason, 75) is bitterly appropriate, for the vindictive counsellor is punished with the loss of her ability to have her advice listened to; and that, apart from the mocking repetition of Vǫlundr’s macabre gift to her when he tells Níðuðr the details of his revenge (st. 35), is the last we hear of her.

The poet’s third female character, Bǫðvildr, is of course important in all versions of the story, but it seems to me that her character in *Vǫlundarkviða* is highly individual. Usually, she is regarded with sympathy: this is true in *Þiðreks saga* (where she has a quite different name), by implication in *Deor* (where the grievous situation is seen from her point of view), and in the distant reflections of the story in *Friedrich von Schwaben* and the Gascon folktale outlined by Jón Helgason (47–8). But in *Vǫlundarkviða* this sympathy is considerably modified. She is first introduced in two references to her wearing the ring which once belonged to the swan woman: her mother’s casual reference to it as hers (17:3–4) when the queen gloats over Vǫlundr’s recognition of it, and Vǫlundr’s own contrasting reference to it as “brúðar minnar ... bauga rauða” (the red ring[s] of my bride; 19:2–4). There could be a hint here that Vǫlundr knows already, since she is wearing the ‘insignia’ of his wife, that the ring magic which was intended to bring back the swan woman will bring her to him (see above). The breaking of the ring would then

be symbolically appropriate: if it contains a sexual magic, any woman who wears it while defying its significance is bound to break it, and it can only be repaired by re-uniting the wearer of it to its magical meaning.

The poet clearly visualises Bǫðvildr as present when the captured Vǫlundr is condemned to mutilation, and as seeing his reaction on recognising the ring. In view of this, her next action, in coming to him with the broken ring and asking him to mend it, shows an astonishing blend of arrogance and insensitivity. She is the sort of woman who seeks to get her own way by a mixture of what she regards as feminine charm with flattering the servant by making him her partner in a little conspiracy. There is also a touch of duplicity about the way she intends to conceal the breaking of the ring from her parents; she thoroughly deserves the insincere reassurances Vǫlundr offers her in return (st. 27), and perhaps even the drink-supported seduction which follows. Indeed, if the breaking of the ring symbolised a divorce between its magical significance and the actual situation, as suggested above, she is unwittingly asking to be seduced when she demands its repair. That, however, does nothing to reconcile me to Vǫlundr's coldly single-minded attitude to her, or to his heartless laughter as he rises into the air and abandons her (29:5–6). Bǫðvildr is not only deceived and made pregnant, but also morally humiliated, since her grief is caused by Vǫlundr's departure as well as by fear of her father's anger (29:9–10). It would seem that she has become sexually dependent on her seducer.

At the end of the poem, Bǫðvildr is left to face her father's blunt question about whether she slept with Vǫlundr (st. 40). Obviously, she is pregnant and cannot deny it. But there is a contrast between her splendid clothing (39:5) and the uneasy excuses with which the poem ends. It may be true that she lacked the cunning and strength to resist Vǫlundr, but her grief at his departure casts doubt on her implication that she would have resisted him if she had been able to. Once again, she looks insincere, morally as well as physically compromised.

It seems clear that the poet stresses the role of women in the story largely because his attitude to them is consistently suspicious; he portrays them as selfish, insincere and, in the queen's case, vindictive. There also seem to be traces of a fear of the magical powers of women, which are portrayed as consistently harmful in their effects; perhaps this is not surprising in a culture which regarded *seiðr* as a characteristically female art, treated it with consistent fear and loathing, and made it subject to severe legal penalties (Strömback, 79; Halvorsen). There was an artistic problem here because Vǫlundr himself, as a flying smith of elvish origins, is unavoidably a practitioner of magic, so it was not possible to adopt a single dismissive attitude to all magic without alienating any sympathy we might feel for the poem's central figure. It therefore has to be suggested that Vǫlundr's elvish magic is in some sense natural and just, while the magic of the female

characters, human or otherwise, is morally repulsive and harmful in its effects. We in our turn may find this distinction morally unattractive, but that must not blind us to its presence, or to the possibility that the poet's first audience may have sympathized with it.

But if the hostile portrayal of women in the poem springs from an attempt to portray Vǫlundr's revenge as a kind of justice, we may reasonably ask how far that attempt is successful. Some aspects of it are clear enough: thus Níðuðr is finally left 'deprived of his will' ("vilía lauss" 31:2), just as Vǫlundr was after his capture (11:4); Níðuðr is constantly deprived of sleep in brooding over the loss of his sons (31:1–4), just as Vǫlundr was kept awake plotting revenge after his maiming (20:1–4); and it is grimly appropriate that the tyrant whose motivation was greed for precious objects should receive the payment he deserves in such objects, made from the skulls of his sons.

It is also possible that Vǫlundr's dynastic revenge on Níðuðr is connected with the other object of which he has been deprived, his sword (sts. 18, 20). Just as the ring seems connected with female sexuality, the sword may be a virility symbol, as it seems to be in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 46 (ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 140–2), where Kjartan's loss of his sword and later recovery of it without its sheath seems to symbolise his loss of sexual self-esteem after he is deprived of Guðrún. A similar symbolism can be seen in the British ballad *Sheath and Knife* (Child, 1:185–7, no. 16), and it seems to have been inherent in the Old English language itself, where the male sex was called *wæpnedcynn*. If the theft of the sword and the physical mutilation are together seen by Vǫlundr as a symbolic castration of him by his captor (for this interpretation of physical mutilation, see Meulengracht Sørensen 1980, 101–6; 1983, 81–5), it may seem just for him to repay this with a negation of Níðuðr's virility and a corresponding assertion of his own.

The queen, too, is appropriately punished, with ironic gifts made from eyes for the observant woman; with loss of the influence over her husband which she has misused; and with loss of her sons because of her part in the symbolic castration of Vǫlundr, in suggesting his mutilation.

Some recent criticism has regarded Þǫðvildr with a good deal more sympathy (e.g. Motz, 63), but she does much to place herself in the position of substitute 'wife', and she can hardly complain about Vǫlundr's seduction of her. His desertion of her, however, is another matter. This rather gives the impression that he is punishing Þǫðvildr for the desertion he himself suffered from the swan woman, for which neither Þǫðvildr herself nor anyone else in her family has the slightest responsibility. And the idea of justice also looks shabby when applied to the murder of the two boys. It might be argued that they are attracted to the smithy for the second time by the same greed for precious objects which motivates their father; but that seems an unduly harsh view, especially as Vǫlundr himself deliberately stirs up this desire in them. Of course, their deaths are required for the completion of Vǫlundr's revenge, but it is a dubious justice which demands casual sacrifice of the innocent in

this way, or which insists on the corporate responsibility of a whole family. Nor is it supported by codes of law: *Grágás* I, chs. 86, 90 permit vengeance for a number of offences, including killing, serious wounding and rape (ed. Finsen, 147, 164–5; tr. Dennis, 141, 154), but only against the offender himself; the only instance of corporate responsibility arises when killing or wounding is done by a child (*Grágás* I, ch. 91), and even then the family is only liable financially (ed. Finsen, 166; tr. Dennis, 155). Similarly, codes that were current in Anglo-Norse areas, such as the secular laws of Cnut (ca. 1027–34), imply the right of vengeance (e.g. in 56, where a murderer is to be handed over to his victim’s relatives; ed. Liebermann, 1: 348–9; tr. Whitelock, 427), but only against the offender in person. And even if insistence on joint family responsibility is common in Old Norse literature, both in verse and prose, and may often have seemed acceptable to contemporary audiences, it must surely have strained their sympathy when the poet insists that the victims are mere children (“*húnar*”, 24:2, 32:4, 34:6), just as it would when Guðrún murders her children in *Atlakviða*. Since “*húnar*” can also mean ‘bear-cubs’ (see above), this is also a return to the imagery of Vǫlundr as a hunter in the first part of the poem (see e.g. st. 4); but now that imagery is suffused with a coldness and cruelty which it did not have when he merely hunted for food. This is also partial and self-interested ‘justice’ in another way, for part of Vǫlundr’s motivation for the boys’ murder seems to be to replace the dynasty of Níðuðr with his own. It is not Níðuðr who has deprived him dynastically (unless symbolically; see above); if anyone, it is the swan woman. Behaving as if Níðuðr were responsible for this looks like a kind of self-deception.

If Vǫlundr had been the divine figure he probably once was, the extreme nature of his ‘justice’ might have seemed acceptable in an ancient, primitive way. Indeed, as Kaaren Grimstad has pointed out (198–201), there remains about him something of the vengeful god confronting a human being who has injured him. One is reminded of the exchange between Cadmus and Dionysus at the end of Euripides’ *The Bacchae*:

Cadmus: ... but your vengeance is too heavy.
Dionysus: I am a god; and you insulted me.

Gods, as Dionysus explains, must take vengeance, “that mortal men may know that the gods are greater than they” (tr. Vellacott, 226, 225). But Vǫlundr is no longer a wholly divine figure, and apart from taking over the probably traditional phrases which call him an elf, the poet seems to regard him as a man. When gods come to be judged by the ethical standards normally applied to human beings, it is not uncommon for Eddie poets to find them wanting (as in *Vǫluspá* and *Lokasenna*); to explain Vǫlundr’s behaviour as due to his elvish origins does not, therefore, amount to a defence of him. In any case, elves were regarded with much suspicion in Christian Anglo-Saxon England (they are among the kindred of Cain killed in the Flood in *Beowulf* 112), and most of the vocabulary associated with them concentrates on their

malicious aspect (see Bosworth-Toller under the headings *ilfig* [mad]; *ælfadl*, *ælfsgoða* [diseases caused by elves]; *ælfside*n [nightmare]; *ælfÞone* [enchanter's nightshade]). The only word with a contrary implication is *ælfsciene* (of elfin beauty), always applied to women, but even this may have included an element of mistrust if the attitudes evident in *Völundarkviða* were at all common.

Anglo-Saxons also seem to have had some doubts about the justice of Weland's revenge. *Deor* and Alfred's *Boethius*, *Metrum* 10, both avoid discussing it (ed. Hill, 21; ed. Krapp, 166), and the Franks Casket carver is by implication hostile to him in juxtaposing the bringing of Bǫðvildr's ring with the gifts of the Magi to Christ: the vengeful old order set against the merciful new one. The poet of *Völundarkviða* is enough of an artist to be more even-handed, and allows us our own view, but the tide of opinion was perhaps already running against such primitive 'justice', and Völundr's days as a hero were numbered.

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Notes

1. All citations of Eddic poems are taken from Neckel and Kuhn except where otherwise stated, and are quoted by stanza and line number.
2. [Ardre Stone VIII is also reproduced below as fig. 3 accompanying the article by Meulengracht Sørensen. *Eds.*]
3. See summary above for arguments for the dissemination of the Vǫlundr story in Northumbria, and for Northumbria as the probable area of origin of *Vǫlundarkviða*.

“Dwarf-lore in *Alvíssmál*”

Paul Acker

Alvíssmál

Alvíssmál is the last of the mythological poems in the principal manuscript of Eddic poetry, the *Codex Regius*. The poem is a dialogue in *ljóðaháttir* meter between a dwarf named Alvíss (All-Knowing) and the less than omniscient god of the Æsir, Þórr. The poem imparts a kind of wisdom. Alvíss tells Þórr the names given by various classes of beings (men, gods, dwarves, giants) to the same basic elements of creation with which (in *Völuspá*) the mythological poems of the *Edda* began: earth, sea, sky, moon, sun, night (but not day; see below), as well as clouds, wind, calm, fire, forest, and two products of human cultivation, grain and ale. Whether the often fanciful names recounted by the dwarf (wind-weaver for the sky; dream-goddess for night) constitute any practical wisdom is doubtful. Earlier scholars thought these terms might reflect ancient tabu names; more recent scholars stress their poetic qualities (Moberg), even while acknowledging that the *idea* of different languages for gods and men (expressed via poetic vs. prosaic words) has mythological resonances found in other Indo-European traditions (Watkins). That the poem in effect compiles various *heiti* or poetic terms, much as Snorri does in his *Edda* and the *Pulur* or lists appended to it, has suggested to many (e.g. Heusler) that the poem should be dated comparatively late, perhaps ca. 1200 (that is, not long before Snorri quoted from it ca. 1220–1241).

The wisdom portion of the poem is cast in a narrative frame involving risk, as in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*. Alvíss is about to carry off Þórr’s daughter, apparently having been promised her by the other gods, when Þórr himself returns and challenges him. He will give away his daughter to this pale, corpse-like ogre of a husband only if the dwarf can tell him all he wants to know from all the worlds known in the Old Norse cosmography. Alvíss has made a good start on this agenda when the day dawns, the sun shines, and (apparently) the dwarf turns to stone (see further below).

Scholarship through 1980 is annotated by Lindow (see also Harris); scholarship through 2000 is treated in variorum fashion (in German) in the

Kommentar series (ed. von See, *et al.*). Aside from the articles by Moberg and Watkins mentioned above, the only sustained study in recent decades has been that of Klingenberg, who comments on structural devices in the wisdom section (e.g. that while most terms are paired, terms for night are requested but not for day; the day petrifies the dwarf after the thirteenth, unlucky question). Most recently, Acker (ch. 3) analyzes the formulaic nature of Þórr's questions and Alvið's answers. Clunies Ross (111–14) discusses the poem comparatively with *Þrymskviða* and other instances of a tabu desire of giants for goddesses.

Paul Acker

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Dwarf-Lore in Alviðsmál

In her 1983 monograph, *The Wise One of the Mountain*, Lotte Motz attempts to construct a single mythological figure underlying the various dwarf and subterranean smith legends found in early Germanic literature and folklore. Her approach is essentially structuralist, paring away all extraneous details to find the synthesizing archetype. In this study I will take an opposite tack,

examining a single, apparently aberrant source of dwarf-lore on its own terms, and then placing that lore within its narrative, generic and mythographic contexts. My source is the Old Icelandic poem *Alvíssmál*.

Alvíssmál is the last of the mythological poems preserved in the *Codex Regius* of the Poetic Edda, before the run of heroic poems begins.¹ Two stanzas (20 and 30) are preserved additionally in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of *Snorra Edda*, where they are quoted (under the title *Alsvinnsmál*) to illustrate poetic terms for wind and night (ed. Finnur Jónsson, 171, 179; ed. Faulkes, 90, 99; tr. Faulkes, 137, 144).²

The poem takes the form of a poetic dialogue between the god Þórr and a dwarf, Alvýss (‘All-Wise’ or ‘All-Knowing’).³ The first eight stanzas introduce a narrative frame in which Alvíss is about to carry off Þórr’s unnamed daughter,⁴ apparently with the gods’ consent since Alvíss asks that ‘a firm vow not be broken’ (st. 3). Þórr claims he was away when the vow was made and only he has the right to give away his daughter (st. 4); he will do so only if the dwarf can tell him all he wants to know from each of the world’s regions.

At this point the wisdom-section of the poem begins (sts. 9–34). In a series of thirteen questions and answers, Þórr asks for the names of such things as heaven and earth, the sun and moon;⁵ Alvíss tells him what they are called by men and the gods (Æsir and Vanir), giants, dwarves, elves and denizens of hell.⁶ For instance, the sun is called *eygló* (ever-glow) by the giants, *fagrahvél* (fair wheel) by the elves, and *Dvalins leica* (Dvalinn’s plaything [Dvalinn being a famous dwarf]) by the dwarves (st. 16).

The narrative frame then resumes in the final stanza. Þórr says he has never seen such wisdom, but that too much talk has trapped the dwarf—he has been caught above ground after daybreak, and ‘now sun shines in the hall’ (*nú scínn sól í sali*, st. 35).⁷ Apparently this means that Alvíss, who lives ‘beneath the earth under a stone’ (*bý ec fyr iqrð neðan,/ á ec undir stei-ni stað*, st. 3), himself turns to stone when struck by sunlight.⁸

Examining this poem as a source of dwarf-lore,⁹ the first thing one may notice about this particular dwarf is that he is interested in sex, or the prospect of it. He wants no ordinary bride, but the daughter of a god, Þórr, whom we may imagine to have been a dangerously over-protective father. Alvíss’s pursuit of a bride is all the more surprising if we consider that the picture emerging from the larger body of Old Norse dwarf-lore is that, as Motz expresses it, dwarves in general “possess no women ... do not propagate their kind through sexual intercourse” (91) and are seldom seen involved in any sort of sociable pursuits. But we must consider whence that image of dwarves derives. Probably our most recurrent image of dwarves in Old Norse literature is to be found in the late *fornaldarsögur* or legendary-heroic sagas. In these sagas we often encounter the following scenario: a hero goes in quest of a weapon suitable for his later exploits; the young warrior needs his mighty sword. It is meet and right in the fairy-tale atmosphere of these quests that the

weapon be secured only after some difficulty is posed. The hero may descend into a barrow and retrieve an old sword from a cantankerous barrow-wight, or he may seek out a dwarf to forge a new sword.¹⁰ In this case, the dwarves are presented as elusive and reluctant donors.¹¹ They are happened upon outside certain enchanted stones, which are doorways to their underground domains. The hero customarily bars the dwarf's return, and thereby coerces him into crafting the wonderful weapon or otherwise helping him on his quest (sometimes a few other objects are thrown in, such as a lovely chair in *Áns saga bogsveigis* [ch. 1], which the young hero brings home to his mother).¹² From such a motif and its prevalence we can easily see how Motz would deduce an underground smith figure as the underlying archetype for all dwarves. But we need to consider this motif structurally in its narrative context. The dwarves are reluctant donors and to provide a suitable element of conflict or challenge, it is expedient that they be difficult of access, unsociable if you will. Not only are their sex lives irrelevant, but any contact with the outside world is to be downplayed. That their reclusiveness, however, can easily be converted into sociability when the tale requires it, even within the same narrative function, is proved by an episode in another legendary-heroic tale, *Sqrla Þátrr*.¹³

Here the quester is not a young hero but rather Freyja in a late incarnation. She is no longer the powerful fertility goddess of a matriarchal Vanir cult, nor the (allegedly) promiscuous love goddess of the patriarchal Æsir cult, but rather the acquisitive mistress of a euhemerized, human Óðinn. As such Freyja seeks from dwarves not a weapon but a beautiful necklace. Her 'quest' is not altogether purposeful; she happens by the dwarf-stone one day (but apparently knew where to find it) and sees four dwarves inside the stone forging a gold necklace.¹⁴ Freyja offers to buy the treasure but the dwarves will part with it only if Freyja sleeps with each of them in turn on successive nights, which she agrees to do "whether she found it easy to bring herself to this or not" (Garmonsway & Simpson, 299). Here we see that the rules can change for the female quester.¹⁵ When Freyja desires something from a dwarf, she does not aggressively interpose her body: she allows the dwarves access to her body; she uses sex as a weapon. And the dwarves must be sociable, oversexed even, if the narrative function is to proceed.¹⁶ We know from *Lokasenna*, a poem in which Loki insults each of the gods in turn, that Freyja was accused of having taken as a lover every 'god and elf' in the room, including her brother Freyr (sts. 30 and 32). The sexist joke in *Sqrla Þátrr* is probably that Freyja will sleep with anyone, even a dwarf, or better, four dwarves, in a kind of pornographic version of Snow White.¹⁷

But in *Alvíssmál* the dwarf's sexuality functions in a different way. Þórr is not seeking to obtain a precious object from the dwarf; he is trying to prevent the dwarf from obtaining something precious from him, his daughter.¹⁸ While Alvíss's actions may seem aberrant for a dwarf,¹⁹ they are very much in keeping with actions undertaken by giants in other myths.²⁰ In the Eddic poem

Þrymskviða, for example, a giant steals the Æsir's principal weapon against the race of giants, Þórr's hammer.²¹ To win it back, the Æsir must give away something which is not only precious to them but which pollutes the very separation between the races which they have been trying to maintain: they must turn over Freyja as a bride. In *Þrymskviða* the myth is given comic treatment. Þórr must suffer humiliation in the form of cross-dressing; improbably enough he impersonates Freyja. When he is on the verge of marrying a giant, when the hammer is placed on his lap as the phallic climax of the wedding ritual, Þórr seizes his hammer and bludgeons the upstart suitor and all his kind. This myth seems to have at its root a xenophobia, a fear of miscegenation, driven home with the threat of a giant-sized homosexual insult, should Þórr remain the 'bride' much longer.²²

We may also compare two similar myths retold by Snorri in his *Edda*. In one of these tales, a giant in the shape of an eagle carries off Loki. To escape he promises to hand over the goddess Iðunn and her apples. Later, with the help of Freyja's falcon-skin, Loki recaptures Iðunn, and the Æsir set the giant on fire as he flies back over the ramparts of Ásgarðr. The giant is destroyed at the moment his sexual desire crosses the limits of Æsir tolerance.²³

Similarly, in another of Snorri's tales, a stranger is promised Freyja as a bride if he can build a fortification around Valhøll in what seems like an impossibly short time. The stranger would have succeeded if Loki had not disguised himself as a mare in heat and lured away the stranger's work horse. The stranger flies into a giant-rage, thus revealing his true racial identity, at which point Þórr returns from a troll-drubbing expedition and kills the giant. The vows which the gods had made are considered invalid when applied to a giant; he is outside the protection of Æsir ethics. Meantime Loki as a mare gives birth to a splendid foal; again the miscegenation myth is capped by sexual inversion.²⁴

Placed in the context of these myths, Alvíss loses the unsociability of dwarves in other tales when this tale demands he play the role of sexual interloper. Þórr will again act as protector of the daughters of the gods, his own daughter in this case. Each of the other intermarriage myths involved an element of temporary subversion, of near-transformation into the hated race or its accoutrements: Þórr posed as a bride and almost married a giant; Loki with Freyja's help posed as a bird to trap a giant in the form of a bird; Loki posed as a mare and was impregnated by a giant horse rather than let a giant possess Freyja.

In *Alvíssmál*, Þórr also takes on an unusual role, that of a seeker of knowledge. It has often been said that Þórr cannot have been the original main actor in this poem, since he is usually portrayed as a bludgeoning blockhead, the comic dupe of clever giants.²⁵ This view goes on to assert that Þórr's role must originally have been intended for Óðinn. In the Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, for example, it is Óðinn who questions a giant about mythological lore, and Óðinn was the traditional seeker after wisdom and

victor in contests of wits. But Þórr does not really match wits with the dwarf; he only questions him as a diversionary tactic. Alviðss knows all things; Þórr need only know one thing (the dwarf's vulnerability to sunlight), which Alviðss overlooks.²⁶ In fact we might even say that Þórr exemplifies the advice given in the wisdom poem *Hávamál* (sts. 54–6): one should be moderately wise, *meðalsnotr*, rather than all-knowing, *alsnotr*.

This brings us to a second feature of dwarves suggested by *Alviðssmál*, that they are wise. Again, we find a rather different tradition in the *fornaldarsögur*, not that dwarves are stupid, but that they are best known as skilled craftsmen²⁷ with sufficient magical powers to put curses on their weapons. In Eddic sources there is only a hint that dwarves are wise; in *Völuspá* (st. 48) dwarves are called “veggbergs vísir” (the wise ones of the rock). Elsewhere a few names appearing in lists of dwarves suggest that at least some other dwarves were wise; these include: Ráðspakr and Ráðsviðr ‘wise in counsel’; Sviðr and Vitr ‘wise’; and Fjölsviðr ‘very wise’ (the meaning also of Alviðss and his variant name Alsvinnr).²⁸ Here as in its assertion of dwarf sexuality *Alviðssmál* is anomalous, and here again generic pressures may be at work. *Alviðssmál* is at base a wisdom poem cast in a narrative frame.²⁹ The wisdom is to be exacted under pressure, that of the abduction of Þórr's own daughter, by means of a challenge, that Alviðss may have Þórr's daughter only if he answers all Þórr's questions. In the end the wisdom is secured without penalty by means of trickery, namely Þórr's delaying tactics. The dwarf's eyes were kept on one thing, the wisdom challenge, while he overlooked another thing, advancing daylight, in a variation of the deceptive questionnaire familiar from psychology courses.³⁰ But the situation is somewhat different from that in *Vafþrúðnismál*, when Áðinn questions a know-it-all giant (and presumably not all giants are wise either). Here Áðinn finally wins the contest by asking a question to which only he knows the answer (st. 54);³¹ but Þórr does not need to know any answers, and it is probably just as well.

The final element of dwarf-lore contained in *Alviðssmál* which I wish to consider is found at the end of the poem, where Alviðss apparently turns to stone at daybreak. I say ‘apparently’, because the poem only reads “uppi ertu, dvergr, um dagaðr,/ nú scínn sól í sali,” (dwarf, you are ‘dawned upon’; now the sun shines in the hall [st. 35]). The assumption that this means Alviðss turns to stone can be made on a comparative basis with the heroic Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hjörvarðsonar*, in which a *giantess*, not a dwarf, turns to stone at daybreak (st. 30), having been delayed (‘dvalða’) by the taunts and questions of Atli and Helgi. The expression *daga uppi*, according to Cleasby-Vigfusson, occurs in only one other place, *Grettis saga* (ch. 65).³² Here it is not a dwarf but a troll-woman who turns to stone at dawn.³³ No dwarf in Old Norse sources is unequivocally said to turn to stone at daybreak. In *Ynglingasaga*, a dwarf stands at the ‘doors’ of a huge stone and entices King Sveigðir to enter therein if he wishes ‘to meet Áðinn’ (which Sveigðir had been seeking to do). He does so and is never heard from again, having presumably gone indeed to

meet Óðinn. The event takes place ‘after sunset’. In the poem *Ynglingatal* quoted as evidence immediately thereafter, the epithet *dagskjarr* (day-shy) is applied to the dwarf, which may mean he has reason to fear the dawn.³⁴ Similarly, the dwarf-name Dvalinn, which probably means ‘he who was delayed’,³⁵ may conceal an allusion to a dwarf who like Alvíss was delayed past dawn. In Þórr’s questioning of Alvíss, we notice that he asks for the terms for night (st. 29) but not for day; given the usual pairing of terms, the omission of ‘day’ is probably intentional: Þórr does not wish to remind the dwarf of his vulnerability to sunlight.³⁶ Perhaps dwarves in the prose sources are displeased to be barred re-entry through their ‘doors of stone’ because they are afraid to be caught above ground after sunrise.³⁷

Even if we assume that Alvíss turns to stone at dawn, it does seem unlikely that all dwarves should possess this fatal weakness. If that were the case, we would have to assume that all episodes involving dwarves take place either underground or after dusk, including the Eddic episodes involving Andvari in the heroic poem *Reginismál*,³⁸ or Snorri’s account in *Skáldskaparmál* of the dwarves who made the mead of poetry (ed. Finnur Jónsson, 82’3; ed. Faulkes, 3’4; tr. Faulkes, 61’2).

If we search beyond the medieval period to later Icelandic folklore for help in unravelling this difficulty, we are at first disappointed to learn that dwarves in later folk-tales are largely replaced by trolls.³⁹ Böðvarsson records a number of tales in which trolls are turned to stone at sunrise.⁴⁰ These tales are usually told in order to explain the curious shapes of the many standing rock pillars to be encountered in Iceland (as in the episode from *Grettis saga* referred to above). But it is interesting to note that folklore provided a rationalized solution to the problem of some trolls turning to stone at dawn and some apparently roaming the countryside by day. Trolls were divided into two classes: the common garden variety and a separate class of ‘night-trolls’.⁴¹

We can then suggest that some dwarves were ‘night-dwarves’. Or we can assume an unresolved discrepancy, and simply accept that dwarf-lore will vary from source to source according to differing narrative demands. This is perhaps the wisest approach to the problem. But since we have the example of Þórr’s middle-wisdom before us, I will conclude by venturing beyond the wholly wise into (perhaps) the half-baked, and offer a different solution to the uniqueness of the dwarf Alvíss.

When Þórr asks Alvíss for the names of the sun, the dwarf says that dwarves call the sun “Dvalins leica,” which most likely means ‘Dvalinn’s plaything’ or ‘Dvalinn’s toy’.⁴² Dvalinn seems to have been the oldest and wisest of the dwarves; he gave runes to the dwarves (*Hávamál* st. 143) and dwarves are once called collectively ‘Dvalinn’s host’ (Dvalins liðr, *Völuspá* st. 14).⁴³ His name, as mentioned above, probably means ‘the delayed one’; presumably his fate, like that of Alvíss, was to be delayed past sunrise. By calling the sun ‘Dvalinn’s plaything’, is Alvíss making an ironic joke, since the sun would have made a deadly plaything? Or is the sun a tabu word in the

language of dwarves, who diminish its power by giving it a propitiatory name, much as the Furies were sometimes called the Eumenides [the kindly ones] in Greek mythology? Since Dvalinn and Alvið are the *only* dwarves for whom a deadly delay can be asserted with any degree of confidence, might we go one step further and suggest that in fact Alvið *is* Dvalinn, traveling—as Óðinn often did—under an assumed name?⁴⁴ In any case the term *Dvalins leica* as the dwarves' name for the sun neatly forecasts the appearance of the sun at the poem's close, bringing with it the demise of Alvið: the dwarf who knew all, even (perhaps) his own fate.

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Notes

1. On the organization of the *Codex Regius*, see the introduction to this volume.
2. Snorri drew on the poem for some of his other lists of terms in *Skáldskaparmál*; the terms for 'sun' (ed. Finnur Jónsson 166; ed. Faulkes, 133, cp. 85; tr. Faulkes 164, cp. 133) include all those mentioned in st. 16, including *Dvalins leica*, which will be discussed below.
3. Snorri's variant name *Alsvinnr* also means 'All-Wise'; see further below on dwarf-names.
4. We know from *Skáldskaparmál* in *Snorra Edda* that Þórr had a daughter named Þrúðr (ed. Finnur Jónsson, 94, 95, 109; ed. Faulkes, 14, 15, 29; tr. Faulkes, 72, 73, 85) and that she was abducted by a giant named Hrungr (ed. Finnur Jónsson, 152; ed. Faulkes, 69; tr. Faulkes, 120). It would seem careless of Þórr to have allowed the same daughter to be abducted twice; perhaps the two myths represent different versions with similar resonances. See further Clunies Ross.
5. Taken in order, Þórr asks for the names of earth, heaven, moon, sun, clouds, wind, calm, sea, fire, wood, night, seed and ale.
6. The term used by men is the same as the one used in Þórr's questions except in sts. 24 and 32. Usually the term used by the gods (*Æsir* or *goð*) is a poetic synonym attested elsewhere, while the other terms are inventions; see Watkins.
7. All Eddic citations are from Neckel and Kuhn; all Eddic translations are my own.
8. This aspect of dwarf-lore will be discussed further below.
9. On Norse dwarf-lore in general, see de Boor; Gould 1927, 190–200; Gould 1929, 959–967; MacCulloch, 264–274; Schlauch (see index); Reichborn-Kjennerud; Böberg 108–111; Lecouteux, 94–120; and Motz.
10. Both motifs occur in *Hervarar saga* (ed. & tr. C. Tolkien, 14, 68).
11. This term is taken from Propp, in his structuralist analysis of the "morphology" of Russian fairy tales and their constituent "functions". On page 36 he discusses the donor "or,

more precisely, the provider ... It is from him that the seeker obtains some means (usually magical) to be used in the eventual liquidation of misfortune.”

12. Ed. Guðni Jónsson, 2:368-9; tr. Hughes, 34. On the motif in general see Gould 1927, 198; Schlauch, 145-6; Boberg, 109 item F451.3.2.1.1; and Motz, 99.

13. Ed. Guðni Jónsson, 1.365-382; tr. Kershaw, 38-57 (but she expurgates via ellipses those passages where Freyja's sexual bargain is specified). The first two chapters, which include the necklace episode, are translated in Garmonsway & Simpson, 298-300.

14. This necklace is presumably the same as the *men Brisinga* Freyja wears in *Brymskviða* st. 13 (and mentioned often by Snorri; see the index in Faulkes's translation), itself apparently related to the *Brosinga mené* alluded to in the Old English poem *Beowulf* (ed. Klaeber, line 1199); see Orchard, 25 and Simek, 44-6.

15. When the female is still a virgin and is the only survivor left to take on a formerly male quest, she may do so by taking up the sword in the classic male fashion, most notably in *Hervarar saga* (see Clover).

16. The author of the tale feels compelled to interject, “Dwarves had intercourse with human beings more then than now” (Gould 1927, 192).

17. Motz mentions also an episode in *Sigurðar saga Þögla* in which Sigurðr “deeply humiliates a queen by forcing his love upon her while he is in the likeness of a dwarf” (114). Schlauch (28) and Dumézil (96) compare an episode in Saxo in which Óðinn's wife Frigg first gets smiths to strip a gold statue of its arm rings and then sleeps with a servant to obtain the gold (ed. Olrik, 25; tr. Fisher, 1.25-6).

18. The name of Þórr's daughter, Þrúðr, appropriately enough means ‘power’. Interestingly, however, the names of Freyja's two daughters, Hnoss and Gersemi, mean ‘precious’ or ‘treasure’. Of Hnoss, Snorri writes ‘She is so beautiful that from her name whatever is beautiful and precious is called *hnossir* [treasures]’ (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 35; ed. Faulkes, 29; tr. Faulkes, 29-30).

19. The dwarf Mjǫndul in *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* enchants and then sleeps with one Ingibjörg, but he is “a figure apart from the rest. ... a novellized creation of the high tide of mediaeval romance” (Gould 1927, 199).

20. Þórr, commenting ostensibly on the dwarf's appearance, says Alviðr seems ‘like a *Purs* [giant or troll] ... not born for a bride’ (st. 2).

21. As Snorri expresses it in *Skáldskaparmál*, the gods agreed that Mjǫllnir was ‘the greatest defence against frost-giants’ (ed. Finnur Jónsson, 124; ed. Faulkes, 42; tr. Faulkes, 97).

22. See further Clunies Ross in this volume. In Old Norse society, the most potent insult involved claiming a man was *argr* or effeminate, adopting a passive homosexual role; see Meulengracht Sørensen.

23. In *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 78-80; ed. Faulkes, 1-2; tr. Faulkes, 59-60.

24. In *Gylfaginning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 45-47; ed. Faulkes, 34-35; tr. Faulkes, 35-36.

25. Most famously in the tale of Útgarda-Loki in *Snorra Edda* (*Gylfaginning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 49-61; ed. Faulkes, 37-43; tr. Faulkes, 37-46).

26. In his dealings with clever giants, Þórr sometimes exhibits similarly practical wisdom, as Clunies Ross & Martin have argued (66-7).

27. This is one of their principal roles in the Eddas also; among many other things, they made Óðinn's spear and Þórr's hammer (*Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 122-4; ed. Faulkes, 41-42; tr. Faulkes, 96-7).

28. See Gould 1929, 963; the lists or þulur are found in *Vǫluspá*, sts. 11-16 and (variously) in manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*.

29. The wisdom itself is of a different order than the mythological lore usually imparted by such poems in the Edda. The terms for objects which Alviðr recounts are probably not to be taken as literal representatives of mythological ‘dialects’, but rather are poeticisms, most of them invented for the occasion (see Moberg; Watkins). Snorri himself offered a caveat before presenting a list of terms in *Skáldskaparmál*, some of which derive from *Alvíssmál*: ‘But these

poetical terms like others seem to me not proper to include in poetry unless one finds similar terms already in the work of major poets' (tr. Faulkes, 133; ed. Faulkes, 85).

30. The scenario is a familiar one in folklore and ballads, as when the devil is asked to answer certain questions.

31. The same motif and question (what did Óðinn whisper into Baldr's ear on his pyre) are imitated in the riddles of Gestumblindi section of *Hervarar saga* (ed. & tr. C. Tolkien, 44).

32. The uniqueness of the occurrence in *Grettis saga* is confirmed by the CD-ROM saga corpus and concordance (Thorsson).

33. Ed. Guðni Jónsson, 213; tr. Fox and Pálsson, 138.

34. Ed. Aðalbjarnason, 1.27–8; tr. Hollander, 15–16.

35. Taking *dvalinn* as a past participle (beside *dvalðr*) of *dvelja* 'to delay' is perfectly straightforward, and the name is defined thus by Gering (13, and followed by La Farge & Tucker, 40), rejecting the definition in Egilsson & Jónsson (90) 'one who lies in sleep' (rendered 'Torpid' by Gould 1929, 944). The latter definition, which as La Farge informs me (private communication) goes back to the 1787 *Edda Sæmundar* edition (1:459, "Soporatus, dormiens"), depends on a comparison with Danish *dvale* 'deep sleep, hibernation'; but as Kahle points out (149–50), that meaning is not attested for the Old Icelandic cognate *dvǫl* (delay).

36. That Þórr asks thirteen questions may also be calculated; certainly the thirteenth and final stanza proves unlucky for the dwarf (see Klingenberg).

37. Thus Reichborn-Kjennerud, 280, although the sources never specify why the dwarves are anxious, nor seldom that the episodes take place at night (with the exception of *Ynglinga saga*, mentioned above). Müllenhoff (5.274) suggested that Þjóðrörir chants before the mysterious 'Delling's doors' in *Hávamál* 160 in order to warn the dwarves that the sun was coming up (so also Gering, 159; Egilsson & Jónsson, 80; C. Tolkien, 34).

38. Reginn himself, who tutors the hero Sigurðr and forges his sword, is a 'dwarf in stature', but apparently the 'most skilled of men' rather than a dwarf (*Reginismál*, introductory prose).

39. Böðvarsson prints two tales involving dwarfs, one about a healing dwarf who lives in a stone (1.454–5, tr. Boucher, 65–6 as "The Last Dwarves in Iceland"); and one about a stone thought to have been inhabited by dwarfs (2.72, tr. Powell, 2.1xvi–lxvii).

40. 1.147–8, tr. Powell, 1.122–4; 1.156, end tr. Powell, 1.130–1; and see references for 'night-trolls' below. Cp. a similar episode in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, end of ch. 2. Tolkien of course made use of much Norse dwarf-lore, including adopting names for many of his characters from the list of dwarf names embedded in *Vǫluspá*; see Shippey, 56–8, 87–8.

41. Böðvarsson, 1.197–206 and 3.279–83, tr. as follows: 1.197 (introductory remarks), Powell, 2.1xiv–lxv; 1.198–199 (Nátttröllid), Boucher, 46–48 and Hallmundsson, 41–2; 1.199 (Karl og kerhng), Powell, 1.148; 1.206 (Djúpir eru Íslands álar), Hallmundsson, 42; 1.199–200 (Upptök Drangeyjar), Boucher, 58–9.

42. Thus Cleasby-Vigfusson, Fritzner (but changed in the supplement), and Faulkes (tr. 133, 164). The term doubtless must be read ironically in context (see below), but that does not mean the gloss itself should be changed to read something like 'deluder' (La Farge and Tucker (157), following a line of context glosses going back through Gering (333), Wimmer (198) and Grundtvig (209). (Kock [106] points out that the verb *leika* can mean both 'to play' and 'to ensnare', and so the derived noun could mean 'a snare', but this still seems context-motivated; English 'to toy with' is comparable, but the noun 'toy' does not mean 'deluder'.) *Dvalins leica* as a kenning for sun is mentioned twice in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of *Snorra Edda* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, 166 & 212; ed. Faulkes, 85 & 133; tr. Faulkes, 133 & 164) and is used by the post-medieval versifier of the solutions to the riddles of Gestumblindi in *Hervarar saga* (ed. Petersen, 37; see Helgason, xlvii–ii).

43. Cp. *Eáfnismál* st. 13, where some Norns are said to be 'Dvalinn's daughters'. 'Dvalinn's drink' (variously expressed) can be a skaldic kenning for 'poetry' (see Egilsson, 90), but in such expressions apparently the name of any dwarf will do (see Turville-Petre, 39).

De Boor (548) comments that Dvalinn is one of the few dwarf names found both in and outside of the lists of dwarf names (he considers these lists [referred to above] to be literary games rather than expressions of mythological belief). Dvalinn is also the name of one of the four dwarves with whom Freyja sleeps in *Sǫrla þáttr* (see above), and of the dwarf who forges the sword Tyrting in *Hervarar saga* (C. Tolkien, 14 & 68). MacCulloch calls Dvalinn “a representative dwarf” (265).

44. E.g. as Grímnir in *Grímnismál*, Gagnráðr in *Vafþrúðnismál*, and Gestumblindi in *Hervarar saga*. Óðinn recites a list of his names in *Grímnismál*, sts. 46–50.

“*Rígsþula*: Some Medieval Christian Analogues”

Thomas D. Hill

Rígsþula

Rígsþula does not occur in the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda; it is found instead in the Codex Wormianus, a principal manuscript of Snorri’s *Edda*. Based on its style and subject matter, however, it is usually allowed into the canon of Eddic mythological poems (the same is true of *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð*, treated together with *Völuspá* in the next essay). A prose introduction clarifies that Rígr was an alias of Heimdallr, one of the Æsir. He comes to the house of Ái and Edda (Great-grandfather and Great-grandmother). They feed him; he advises them and sleeps between them for three nights. Nine months later Edda bears a child they call Þræll (thrall, slave or serf). His appearance and duties and those of his eventual mate and children are described. (The catalogue of their many names, and those of Karl’s and Jarl’s families, is probably reflected in the poem’s title; a *þula* is a list.) Next Rígr stays at the house of Afi and Amma (Grandfather and Grandmother), where he engenders Karl (freeman or peasant farmer); then at the house of Faðir and Móðir (Father and Mother), where he engenders Jarl (nobleman). Rígr instructs him in runes and aristocratic accomplishments. Jarl marries; his youngest son is called Konr *ungr* (young nobleman). He knows runes and, like the young legendary hero Sigurðr, he can understand the language of birds. Doubtless he will grow up to become a *konungr* (king), but the poem breaks off fragmentarily, after a crow exhorts Konr *ungr* to pursue the martial career of his father.

In 1981 Dronke argued that verses in two Icelandic sagas allude to *Rígsþula* (see Harris, 94–7 for earlier articles on the poem). In her edition, translation and commentary (1997), Dronke adds a third saga passage and suggests that the poem preserves archaic Norse-Celtic material but is less a myth than a learned fiction, composed perhaps ca. 1020. Karras thinks the poem’s view of society fits in better with the thirteenth century (60–63 and

notes, 208–10). Fleck discusses knowledge of runes as a criterion for (sacral) kingship.

Rígsþula is apparently one of the more cosmopolitan of the Eddic poems; most scholars agree it shows signs of Celtic influence (the name Rígr is most likely a borrowing of the Irish word for king) as well as contact with some form of Christianity, perhaps from England. In his essay reprinted below, Thomas Hill explores analogues, chiefly from the British Isles, for the tripartite social division of mankind, as found in extra-Biblical material relating to the three sons of Noah.

Paul Acker

Further Reading

Dronke, Ursula. “*Sem jarlar forðum*: The Influence of *Rígsþula* on Two Saga-Episodes.” *Speculum norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*. Ed. Ursula Dronke, et al. Odense: Odense University Press, 1981. 56–72. Rpt. *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands*. Variorum Collected Studies Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996. Item X (separate pagination).

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Harris, Joseph. “Eddic Poetry.” *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*. Ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. *Islandica*, 45. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985. 68–156.

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Rígsþula: Some Medieval Christian Analogues¹

In the context of Eddic mythological poetry, *Rígsþula* is strikingly anomalous.² The poem speaks of an otherwise unknown god, Rígr, whom the prose preface identifies with the Norse god Heimdallr. He visits in sequence three households. The first is that of Ái and Edda, whose names mean ‘great-grandfather’ and ‘great-grandmother’; the second that of Afi and Amma, ‘grandfather’ and ‘grandmother’; the third that of Faðir and Móðir, ‘father’ and ‘mother’. Rígr spends three nights in bed with each couple, and from these unions spring Þræll, Karl, and Jarl, forebears of the races of slaves, freemen, and nobles. The poem concludes with an account of Konr, the youngest son of Jarl, who is apparently about to establish himself as a king when the poem breaks off.

No version of this etiological myth other than *Rígsþula* is extant in Old

Icelandic or the other early Germanic literatures, and the social structure which the myth presumes is, in fact, profoundly different from the actual social structure of early medieval Iceland. Slavery was eliminated early in the history of the commonwealth; early Icelandic law does not distinguish between noble and commoner; and the Icelanders had no king until they submitted to the Norwegian throne in 1262.³ According to *RígsPula*, however, the distinction between slave, freeman, and noble is not an arbitrary social convention; it is quite literally inbred. The poem is extremely, one might even say brutally, aristocratic in its ideology. Although the poem is concerned with the origins of kingship, it seems to reflect a specifically aristocratic rather than royalist view, in that the king who begins to emerge in the final stanzas of the poem is not set apart by birth from the other sons of Jarl, and is in fact the youngest son. It is Konr the young (Konr *ungr*) who becomes a king (that is, a *konungr*), and the poem seems to imply that he will become king simply by right of conquest.

But while the poem denies the common humanity of the three classes of mankind, the names of the three couples (great-grandfather and great-grandmother, grandfather and grandmother, father and mother) might seem to imply that the various classes of mankind share a common heritage. Indeed one commentator has suggested that the poet believed in social progress over time—that the descendants of a given class might aspire to a higher condition of life (Sveinsson, 291–2). But this reading of the poem seems too benevolent. What is at issue is who should do the servile work, and the answer which the poem unequivocally offers is that the thralls, that ugly race born to serve, should work for the benefit of their masters. The notion of social progress, of ascent from one class to another, was alien (and indeed probably repugnant) to the poet. The meaning of these names nevertheless still requires explanation. I would submit that while the poet was an explicit and unabashed apologist for social differentiation, he was intelligent enough to be aware that social differences do not have a physical basis. Despite the explicit statement of the *RígsPula* poet, slaves, freemen, and aristocrats do not necessarily look different, and a young aristocrat might find slaves—in certain contexts—to be good companions. On a hunt, for example, a slave might be skillful and brave, or back at the manor a slave girl might be sexually attractive. If *Þrælar* and *jarlar* really were different races, sprung from the beginning from different stock, such moments of community, of shared human feeling, would presumably not happen. But of course they do, and the *RígsPula* poet offers an implicit answer. The different orders of mankind are indeed fixed and unchangeable, but in the very beginning there was a certain kinship between the different orders of mankind, a kinship suggested by the fixed and yet linked sequence of the genealogical chain.

In terms of its contents *RígsPula* is a repellent poem, particularly so because of the clear intimations of a kind of racism implicit in the description of the various social classes. *Þræll* has dark hair and is ugly and twisted; Karl

is ruddy, “rauðan ok rioðan”; Jarl is blond. But the very fact that *RígsPula* is so blatant in its insistence upon a specifically aristocratic ideology is revealing, in that it illustrates with great clarity certain crucial features of this ideology. The most important point about the myth is that it denies explicitly the conception of common humanity. If a *jarl* and a *Præll* are both fully and to the same degree human, then the fact that the *jarl* lives in relative luxury while the *Præll* lives in want is morally problematical. But if they are in some fundamental way different from each other, then their difference in status is natural, like the difference between various species in the natural world. And this is the clear implication of the etiological myth of *RígsPula*. *Prælar*, *karlar*, and *jarlar* are different species, born in the beginning from different stock and different not merely in status and wealth, but in physical appearance. It is no wonder that this myth was not widely popular among Icelanders, who had no native aristocratic class and who believed that their native land had been settled by free men and women who fled Norway because they refused to submit to the political authority of Haraldr *bÁrfagr*, the first Norwegian king.

Although there are no parallels or analogues to this myth in other Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts, some medieval Christian analogues have been mentioned, but not seriously discussed, in connection with the poem (Heusler, 96; Meissner, 115).⁴ These analogues are interesting in themselves and may help provide insight into the difficult problem of the original context of *RígsPula*. Judeo-Christian thought is fundamentally egalitarian; it presumes one common ancestor for all men and an essential equality among all believers within the community of faith. For this reason the institution of the monarchy was alien to ancient Israel, and one of the important themes of the narratives concerning David in 1 and 2 Samuel is that Jahweh chose the youngest son of a man of no great social prestige to rule over Israel so that Israel might know that both king and kinship were utterly dependent upon him. Even so, a significant minority in Israel were never reconciled to the monarchy, a minority whose views are expressed in such texts as I Samuel 8.10–18, and in the context of specifically Jewish Christianity in Stephen’s speech in Acts 7.44–50. As far as the Christianity taught to the Gentile world is concerned, there could hardly be a more radical or thoroughgoing statement of the equality of all believers before God than Paul’s claim in Galatians 3.20 ff. that Jew and Gentile, man and woman, free and slave are all one in Christ.

If Judaism and Christianity are egalitarian religions, however, the world in which Christianity disseminated itself was rigidly hierarchical. The later Roman empire was a strictly ordered and structured social world, and if the barbarian tribes who destroyed that world were less disciplined in some ways than their Roman predecessors, they were just as preoccupied with class and inherited status as the Romans. In the early medieval world, class and rank were very immediate realities. Men naturally wondered about the origin of these institutions and turned to the Bible as the authoritative source

concerning the early history of mankind. The Bible does not specifically speak to these concerns, but there is one verse which, taken out of context, has provided support for the conception that certain groups of people are inherently of less worth than others. One of the more obscure episodes in Genesis concerns Ham's disrespectful behavior towards his father Noe⁵ when the latter falls asleep after drinking too much wine. When Noe awakens and learns what has happened, he curses—oddly enough—not Ham but Ham's son Chanaan: “Maledictus Chanaan, servus servorum erit fratribus suis. Dixitque: Benedictus Dominus Deus Sem, sit Chanaan servus eius. Dilatet Deus Iafeth, et habitet in tabernaculis Sem, sitque Chanaan servus eius” [Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.] (Genesis 9.25–27). To enumerate the difficulties which this episode raises would require an extended digression, but given the fact that the various nations of the world are descended from Noe's sons, it is possible to read it as an etiological narrative concerning the existence of a race of slaves descended from Ham's son Chanaan. Given the widespread and understandable misconception that it was Ham whom Noe cursed, the notion that slaves are descended from Ham is a widespread bit of what one might call extra-biblical Christian folklore. A medieval Latin riddling dialogue asks; “Quo ordine vel pro qua re servi facti sunt?” [By what arrangement or for what reason did slaves come about?] And the answer is “De Cham, qui de verecundia patris sui risit.”⁶ [From Cham who laughed at his father's shame.] There exists a “Christian” etiological myth concerning the origin of slaves; it is a myth that had a sad history during the era of black slavery in America and even beyond it.⁷ Though this gloss on Genesis is still quite remote from the myth of *Rígsþula*, it was the basis, I believe, for an even cruder misreading of the biblical narratives concerning Noe and his sons.

I have found four instances of the motif with which I am concerned. The first is a brief Anglo-Saxon prose text consisting of various bits of canonical and apocryphal information mixed randomly together. The compiler discusses the sons of Noe as follows:

Nôe se heah fæder hæfde þrysunu þa wÆron þus hātene. sēm. chām. iaphēt. 7 of þam Prim sunum wearð onwÆcnad. 7 awrīdād eall manna cynn wearð onbenced 7 þÆr næfre tolāfe newearð ma þonne him eahtum. ac hit eall segifra flod for swealh. 7 for grind. 7 he eac þagyt nolde urne drihten for his myldheort nesse þæte ðes middan geard nære ortydre manna cynnes. ac ascyrede to lafe þæt þæt we eft of awocon þurh þæs halgan heah fæderes ge earnunga nôes 7 his goddra dæda mycelnesse. 7 of him Prim eft wearð awrīdād twa 7 hund seofontig þeoda ealdorlicra mægða. 7 swa fela is eac manna gereorða 7 heora gespræc to dæled. Þonne awoc ærest of iafede noes suna .xv. mægða ealdorlicere 7 mīcele. Þonne on wocon. of chame .xxx. theoda mycelra 7 eac þæt cynn wæs ge seald fram urum drihtne þam oðrum cynnum twam on heaft nēad. 7 on þeow dom. 7 þæt wæs for þon swa ge dōn þæt hege tÆlde his fæder nôe þær he on his sceape lōcode 7 his tobismere hloh. Donne on wōc fram þam ðriddan suna sēme 7 sē

wes heora geongost wæs þeh hwæðere onwisdome yldost seofon 7 twentig þeoda 7 þanon wæs awæcnod þæt æþeluste cynn 7 þæt betste. þæt wæs for þon þe he his fæder noe nage tælde 7 untwe(o)gendlice of þysum þrim mannum noes sunum þæt eall þes middan gearð wearð eft onwæcnod þeh hwe drihten on þreo streonde 7 swa sibbe cneordnesse to dælde. 7 þæt he to dælde for þære tælnysse þe hy heora fæder tældon nōe þæt he on ðreo to wearp þa cneordnysse. þæt wæs wælicsc. 7 oncyrlisc cynn. onge syðcund cynd. for þyssum gyltengum þe we nuge hyrdon wæron þagesyblingas þus to dælde.

Noe the patriarch had three sons who were named thus—Sem, Cham, Iapheth. And of those three sons was sprung and increased all the race of man. [There] were drowned [all men] and there was not left a remnant more than those eight, but the greedy flood swallowed and destroyed everything. And he [God] even then did not wish, because of his pity, that this earth should be barren of the race of man, but he set [them] apart as a remnant from which we sprang in the course of time because of the merits and the greatness of the good deeds of the holy patriarch Noe. And from those three sprang seventy-two chief nations of peoples. And in so many ways are the voices of men and their speech divided. Thence there sprang first from Iapheth, Noe's son, fifteen distinguished and great nations, from Cham thirty great peoples, and also that race was given by our Lord to the other two races in captivity and slavery. And this was done for this reason—that he [Cham] derided his father Noe when he [Cham] looked upon his [naked] body and laughed in scorn of him. Then there sprung from the third son Sem, and he was the youngest of them (he was, however, the oldest in wisdom), twenty-seven peoples, and thence there sprung the noblest and best race. That was because he did not mock his father Noe. And without doubt [it is] from these three men, Noe's sons, that all this earth became populated again—though the Lord parted them into three and so parted three races of relationship because of the mockery with which they mocked their father Noe. And he [God] cast those races into three parts—one was servile, and [the other] the free race and [the third] the noble race. For these offenses which we have now heard were these kinsmen thus parted.

Another brief instance of this motif occurs in the early twelfth century in Honorius Augustodunensis's geographical and historical work, the *Imago mundi*:

Secunda aetas

Sem filius Noe ipse est idem qui et Melchisedech vixit de .ii. Huius tempore divisum est genus humanum in .iii. in liberos, in milites, in servos. Liberi de Sem, milites de Iapheth, servi de Cham.⁹

[Sem, son of the same Noe is the one who like Melchisedech lived 602 years. At this time humanity was divided into 3, into free men, soldiers and slaves. The free come from Sem, the soldiers from Iapheth, the slaves from Cham.]

The *Imago mundi* was an influential text and was disseminated relatively widely; in discussions of later medieval texts it is frequently cited as the source for the association of the sons of Noe with this tripartite division of mankind, but the most recent editor of the *Imago mundi* was not able to identify the source of this piece of extra-biblical lore (ed. Flint, 125).

While the association of Ham and the servile estate is relatively commonplace,¹⁰ I have been able to identify only two further instances of this tripartite division in later medieval literature. In the *Cursor mundi*, an early fourteenth-century biblical poem, the poet speaks of the sons of Noe and remarks:

O þis thre [Noe's sons] can þe folk to brede And fild þe werld o lenth and brede.
O þaim it was sua mani men
O sere kind, sexsith tene.
Knyth, and thrall, and freman,
Oute of þer thre breþer bigan;
O sem freman, o Iaphet knyht,
thrall of cham þe maledight.
O þis thre com all, als þou sais,
Has bene in werld and yeit beis. (1:130, 11. 2129–38).¹¹

[From these three [Noe's sons] people began to breed and filled the length and breadth of the world. From them many men came, of various kinds, six times ten (i.e. 60). Knight, and thrall, and free man, all descended from these three brothers; From Sem, the free man, from Iapheth, the knight, the thrall from Cham the accursed. From these three, as you may see, comes everyone who has ever been in the world and who exists now.]

Again in the late-thirteenth-century *Weltchronik* of Jansen Enikel, after Noe consigns Ham and his children to perpetual slavery, he turns to his other sons:

“Sem, lieber sun mîn,
dû solt hiut und immer sîn
gewaltic und immer frî.
all sæld won dir bî,
und swas künftic von dir sî,
daz müez immer wesen vrî ...
wider den dritten sun er sprach,
dô er in vor im stên sach:
“Japhêt, liber sun mîn,
mit freuden müezt dû immer sîn—
daz hâst dû verdienet wol,
dîn lip ist ganzer triuwen vol—
von hinnen biz an den lesten tac.
mit êrn ich daz wol sprechen mac. ” er sprach: “dû solt mit êren leben,
wan ich wil êr vil an dich legen
und wil dir segen daz swert,
wan dû bist aller êren wert. ”
dô er den segen dô enpfie,
dem vater er vor mit êren gie.
er sprach zuo im vil schône:
“sun, sô dir got lône,
sit diu êr an dir lît,
sô solt dû dînes bruoder wîp,
dînes bruoder kleiniu kindelîn ...
Japhêt was der êrst man,
der ritters namen ie gewan.

sin vater segent im daz swert,
wan er was aller êren wert.
(p. 58, 11. 2995 3000; 3006–25; 3032–6).

[‘Sem, my dear son, you shall today and always be mighty and always free. All happiness shall dwell with you, and those who in future are descended from you, they will always be free.’ ... To the third son he said, whom he saw standing before him: ‘Japhet, my dear son, you will always have joy—for you have earned it well, your body is completely full of trustworthiness—from now until the Day of Judgment, I wish to say honorably,’ he said, ‘that with honor you will always live. I intend to do you much honor, and will bless this sword for you, for only you are worthy of all honor.’ When he had received the blessing, he went before his father respectfully. He spoke many fine words to him: ‘Son, may God reward you since such honor exists in you, you must guard over your brother’s wife and your brother’s little children, with faithful protection.’ ... Japhet was the first man who ever won the name of knight, his father blessing the sword for him; only he was worthy of all honor.]

These are relatively few instances scattered both geographically and temporally, but they show that a Christian etiological myth associating the sons of Noe with the three classes of society had some currency and continuity. There are three points I wish to make about his myth. The first is that it is a radical and radically clumsy misreading of the biblical text.¹² In these texts the author or redactor is attempting to derive a tripartite structure from a text which is essentially bipartite. The story of Ham can be taken to imply that Ham is set apart from his brothers, but both Iafeth and Sem are admirable figures in the biblical narrative. Second, another problem with the myth in relation to its biblical prototype is that in the Old English the nobles are descended from Sem, whereas in the other texts Iafeth is defined as the father of nobility. The problem is not simply one of inconsistency. In its original context the roll call of the sons of Noe had real geographic significance, and this fact was widely known throughout the Middle Ages. Thus to define either Sem or Iafeth as the father of “true ” nobility implies that the nobles of either Europe or Asia are imposters. The difficulty, of course, is that it is impossible to reconcile an etiological myth of this sort with real biblical history.

The third point is that if this myth is a clumsy gloss on the relevant biblical texts, it does correspond closely to the myth of *RígsPula*. To begin with, the ideological content is identical. The three classes have been fixed from the time the history of the nations began to unfold. If these classes did not emerge as part of God’s original plan of creation, the three orders were—according to the Old English text at least—originally and irrevocably separated by God’s judgment. Another correspondence between the Christian myth and *RígsPula* is that mankind is divided into precisely the same three classes. This correspondence is particularly striking in that medieval Europe evolved another pattern of social tripartition, the famous *orator es, bellatores, laborantes* formula,¹³ which was widely current, and which reflects quite a

different view of social function than the myth with which we are concerned. In this formulation the crucial division is between the honorable estates, the *oratores* and the *bellatores* [those who pray and those who fight], and those who work. The distinction between free and slave workers is immaterial. Work, the production of goods and services, is itself degrading.

Are the pagan myth of *Rígsþula* and the analogous Christian myth related, and if so, how? In discussing these questions, caution is necessary since the evidence concerning both the currency of the Christian myth and the sources and transmission of *Rígsþula* is extremely fragmentary. The correspondence between these myths, however, seems sufficiently close that some kind of relationship is very probable. The simplest explanation would be to suggest that *Rígsþula* and the Christian myth originated in a similar social and ideological matrix. The originator of the Christian myth may or may not have known of the pagan myth embodied in *Rígsþula*; the author of *Rígsþula*, wherever and whenever he wrote, seems not to have been influenced by Christian thought. But they both assumed that certain features of the social world as they knew it reflected the way God or the gods had ordered this world, and the myths they constructed embodied this conviction. While the Christian myth (or at least the Old English version of it) is older than the manuscript in which *Rígsþula* is preserved, and perhaps even antedates the composition of the poem, the myth itself accords much better with what we know of Germanic and Celtic pagan thought than with Christianity. Given a choice between the possibility that *Rígsþula* is derived from or modeled after some version of this Christian myth and the alternative possibility that the Christian myth is a “pagan” misreading of the biblical text, I find the latter much more likely. I do not mean by this that some reluctant convert deliberately sought to invest the biblical text with covert pagan meaning; I am concerned rather with the continuity of deeply rooted habits of thought. Some early medieval Christian may have believed in social tripartition of this type as an immediate fact of social life and sought to provide an appropriate biblical etiological myth, perhaps in response to pagan myth or perhaps simply to account for the “fact” of such social tripartition. If so, his gloss may seem clumsy to us, but reflects a serious effort to explain the social order in which he found himself.

The first part of this paper was a relatively straightforward attempt to cite a series of medieval Christian analogues to the myth of *Rígsþula*. The second part, concerning the possible relationship between these myths, was more speculative, though I hope only moderately so. In the final part of the paper I propose to discuss whether these new analogues have any bearing on the extremely difficult problem of the original date and location of *Rígsþula*, and this aspect of my argument will necessarily be speculative indeed. The great problem of *Rígsþula* scholarship is that while the poem is potentially an extremely important source of social history, this importance is largely vitiated by the absence of any reasonably informed consensus as to its date

and provenance.¹⁴ Suggestions as to date and provenance range from the tenth to the thirteenth century and from the Old Norse-Icelandic-speaking areas of the British Isles to Norway. The analogues I have cited do not resolve the issue, but they must be considered along with various other pieces of evidence which have been cited with regard to the possibility of Celtic, specifically Irish, influence on *RígsPula* (Young, 101–7; Turville-Petre, 151). In response to the question of where the Christian myth originated, I would answer, admittedly on the basis of intuition, that it has the look of a specifically “insular” gloss on the Bible. To begin with, the original author or authors, if the gloss originated in several places independently, believed in social tripartition as the “natural” social condition of man. Secondly, the gloss presupposes an intense interest in origins and at the same time a kind of learned crudity which are very characteristic of a certain strand of the tradition of insular exegesis. The author must have read the Bible for this gloss to have occurred to him; if he had read it more carefully and with more sophistication, he would have seen the obvious difficulties which the gloss entails. All these features fit quite readily in an early medieval insular context. In both Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England, social tripartition of this sort was a prominent feature. Again, early Irish exegetical literature reflects an almost obsessive interest in origins and concern for tripartite patterns of the most diverse kind.¹⁵ In the context of later medieval thought, one would expect a somewhat more sophisticated reading of the Bible, and not this particular form of social tripartition. The fact that the earliest example, the Anglo-Saxon text, is an insular text supports this suggestion. That the other examples I have identified occur in Honorius Augustodunensis’s *Imago mundi*, the *Cursor mundi*, and Jansen Enikel’s *Weltchronik* accords with this suggestion, since it was quite common for some of the odder motifs of early medieval exegesis to have an extended afterlife in medieval popular religious texts, long after serious exegetes and theologians dismissed them as fanciful absurdities.¹⁶

The conclusions I have suggested, and in particular the suggestion that the gloss on the sons of Noe has an insular origin, are tentative and must be tested further. But for better or worse, an insular origin has already been proposed for *RígsPula* on other grounds, and if my suggestions are confirmed they would support this hypothesis.

While I have been concerned with this problem for some years and have explored the usual resources, I have no doubt that further instances will turn up. The motif can be summarized succinctly and could occur in unexpected places. When we have a fuller inventory it will be possible to speculate about its sources and dissemination with more assurance. More significantly, perhaps, this paper might redirect attention to a problem which has not received much interest in recent years—the filiations between Germanic and Celtic myth and what one might call “popular Christian mythology.” Some nineteenth-century scholars, particularly some of the more extreme followers of the Grimm brothers, were so zealous to see pagan survivals everywhere

that the whole topic has enjoyed a certain disrepute in Anglo-American scholarship in this field in the twentieth century (see Stanley). But these filiations exist, and the fact that it is necessary to be extremely cautious in exploring them does not mean the subject should be ignored. For if *Rígsþula* and the Christian texts which I have cited are not directly related, an indirect relationship is clear, and this relationship is important for our understanding of the development of the medieval image of the social world. Rígr and Noe are very different figures; the possibility that their children might seem alike could only be the result of historical and religious miscegenation.¹⁷

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Notes

1. In preparing this paper I have been helped materially by friends at Cornell and elsewhere. I would like to thank [the late] Professor R. E. Kasse of Cornell University, Professor George Tate of Brigham Young University, Professor Charles D. Wright of Texas Tech University [now at the University of Illinois], and particularly Professor Joseph Harris of Harvard University.
2. All citations of *Rígsþula* are from Neckel and Kuhn, 1:280–87. *Rígsþula* is not an Eddie poem in the strict sense, since the only text is appended to a fourteenth-century text of the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturlason (Codex Wormianus). For a recent discussion of possible allusions to the myth of *Rígsþula* in the *Íslendinga sögur*, see Dronke.
3. See Jóhannesson, 344–45 et passim. On the problem of slavery in medieval Iceland, see Foote [and Mazo Karras].
4. Of the four analogues to the myth of *Rígsþula* noted below, only the one from *De imagine mundi* has been cited as an analogue of *Rígsþula*. The others, as far as I am aware, have not—at least in the context of Eddie scholarship.
5. Since the crucial form of the story for the purposes of this paper is that of the Latin vulgate, I cite the names in their Latin rather than their more familiar English form.
6. Wilmanns, 169, riddle no. 37. For a later example see Suchier, 267. The riddle in question in no. 30 is the "Gespräch zwischen Adrian und Epictitus," which Suchier edited from a fifteenth-century manuscript.
7. For a good discussion of the influence of this misreading of the Bible on American Southern ideology in the early nineteenth century, see Peterson.
8. Napier, 2–5. The original text of these notes occurs in British Library, Cotton Tiberius A.iii, fols. 43–44. N. R. Ker dates the manuscripts as mid-eleventh century; for a description and discussion of the manuscript as a whole see Ker, 240–48. For the convenience of the reader I have provided a literal and in places rather tentative translation. Napier's text is a diplomatic one and the text as we have it seems confused in places.
9. Honorius Augustodunensis, *Imago mundi*, 3.1, p. 125; PL 172, col. 166. On the career and identity of Honorius Augustodunensis, see Flint, 1977 and 1982. If Flint is correct in arguing that Honorius Augustodunensis spent time in England in the earlier part of his career and that the *Imago mundi* is an early work, then the brief passage I have cited from the *Imago mundi* and the text on Noe and his children from Cotton Tiberius A.iii are closely associated both temporally and geographically.
10. A full gathering of instances of this gloss on the curse of Chanaan would be quite extensive. For some instances gathered virtually at random see *Die altdeutsche Genesis*, ed. Dollmayr, p. 44, 11. 1530–1 et passim; Hugo von Trimberg. *Der Kenner*, 1:56–7, 11. 1360 ff.; *Le mystère du viel Testament*, ed. de Rothschild, 1:252–3, 11. 6472 ff.; Ginzberg, 1:169, 5:192.
11. I quote from the version of the poem preserved in B.L. Cotton Vesp. A. iii; the variants in the other manuscripts are not significant.
12. For a cogent medieval analysis of the absurdity of attempting to ground slavery on this or any other biblical passage, see the *Sachsenspiegel: Landrecht* 3.42, f 1–6 (149), pp. 223–28.
13. There has been a great deal of discussion of this formula recently. See for example, Duby; Dane; Dutton; Le Goff.
14. See Young, and von See, who argues for a later date and a Scandinavian context.

15. For discussion of the characteristic features of Irish exegesis in the early Middle Ages, see Bischoff and McNally. For a study which focuses on triads in early Irish and Irish-Latin literature, see Sims-Williams.

16. For a single but striking example of such a motif, see *The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Ritheus*, ed. Cross and Hill, 67–70, where the dissemination of the apocryphal account of the eight parts of Adam is discussed.

17. It has been suggested that I relate my discussion of *RígsPula* to the comments of Dumézil. Detailed discussion of Georges Dumézil's attempt to relate the tripartite structure of *RígsPula* with his postulated Indo-European tripartite structure would be out of place here, but two points deserve mention. In the first place, Dumézil's whole argument is concerned with the fact that the tripartite structure defined in the poem is quite different from the Indo-European tripartition he postulates. One can imagine how Dumézil's tripartition might have evolved into the one defined in *RígsPula*, but the differences are striking. Secondly, Dumézil's suggestion that *konr ungr* is a magician and priest rather than a warrior is not supported by the text of the poem as we have it, and kings in the ancient Scandinavian world and Germania generally were preeminently leaders in war. [See further the article by Frakes in this volume. *Eds.*]

“Dialogue with a *vǫlva*: *Vǫluspá*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð*”

Judy Quinn

Baldrs draumar and *Hyndluljóð*

The two poems *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð* are not found in the Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda*. *Baldrs draumar* is in a manuscript containing a number of Eddic fragments, AM 748 4°, while *Hyndluljóð* is preserved in *Flateyjarbók*. One stanza (st. 33) occurs in Snorri’s *Edda* where it is designated as part of *Vǫluspá in skamma* (*The Short Vǫluspá*). Sts. 29–44 of *Hyndluljóð* are normally regarded as part of as *Vǫluspá in skamma*, since the transition from st. 28 to 29 is abrupt, both in terms of style and content. At st. 45, *Hyndluljóð* appears to return to the frame situation.

Baldrs draumar is a short poem foreshadowing the death of Baldr. The doomed god is plagued by bad dreams, so Óðinn travels to Hel to find out their cause. At the edge of Hel he meets a dead *vǫlva*; at first she does not recognize Óðinn and he is able to elicit from her the crucial information that Baldr is expected in Hel’s domain shortly. Finally he asks an obscure riddle which reveals his identity. The *vǫlva* refuses to speak further and sinks back into her grave. *Baldrs draumar* was one of the first Eddic poems to be translated into English. Thomas Gray’s version “The Descent of Odin,” published in 1768, established the poem, perhaps inaccurately, as the archetypal Gothick northern poem. *Baldrs draumar* presents few problems: the kenning *hróðrbarm* in st. 9 is difficult to interpret and possibly corrupt, while the riddle Óðinn asks in st. 12 is never answered, although the posing of the riddle reveals the asker to be Óðinn. Heinemann uses the idea that the mead is already brewed for Baldr in Hel’s hall to elucidate the motif of the cup or drink of death in other Germanic poetry. Lindow discusses the poem as part of his thesis that the Baldr myth as a whole reflects problems of kinslaying and feud in Old Norse society. Dronke edits, translates and comments on the text of the poem.

In *Hyndluljóð*’s frame situation, Freyja asks the giantess Hyndla to impart

information about the kin and ancestors of a certain Óttarr who is her protégé. Óttarr is present throughout, disguised as the boar upon which Freyja rides. Hyndla's discourse ranges far more widely than the simple listing of Óttarr's genealogy. In the middle of the poem the tone changes, as outlined above. Finally the giantess refuses to speak further; Freyja requests a memory-drink for Óttarr so that he may remember all the lore he has heard when he has to contend with a certain Angantýr in some days' time and the poem ends with the two females trading insults. The poem has been regarded as problematic. It is not certain whether it is one poem or two; the identification of various persons mentioned in the *Völuspá in skamma* section is also insecure. Fleck has compared the requirement for the hero Óttarr to acquire information about the ancestors of various tribal groups with the monologue of mythological information in *Grþmismál*; he has suggested that both form part of an initiation ritual for a candidate for kingship. For the Marxist critic Gurevich, the poem hinges on the question of Óttarr's inheritance; he notes a tendency inherent in ancient mentality to mythologize and poeticize property relations. The giantess aims to hinder the alliance between Freyja and Óttarr, since it indicates a strategic fusion of interests between Miðgarðr and Ásgarðr against the giant world.

Gro Steinsland, like Fleck, connects *Hyndluljóð* with a global theory about the importance of the ideology of kingship in Old Norse, arguing for the poem's essential unity. Knowledge of ancestry is a crucial requirement for the king, but so too is the marital alliance between gods and giantesses alluded to in the *Völuspá in skamma* section. This alliance produces the ideal future king, who will be able to transcend the warring factions, gods and giants, in the Norse cosmos: the mysterious figure of st. 35, whom Steinsland identifies with Heimdallr.

Judy Quinn's essay links together the various *völur* who appear in the Edda, clarifying their functions in the texts in which they appear. Ranging widely through the mythological poems concerned with the getting of wisdom, she provides an illuminating study of the roles of the *völur* and the divine protagonists of the poems, shedding much incidental light on the figure of Freyja, a goddess unrecorded in Germanic tradition and thus perhaps unique to ancient Scandinavia.

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Further Reading

Baldrs draumar

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Hyndluljóð

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Steinsland, Gro. *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi*. Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1991. 242–306.

(For further reading on *Völuspá*, see the introduction to the essay by Lönnroth in this volume.)

Dialogue with a *völva*: *Völuspá*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð*

The three poems *Völuspá*, *Baldrs draumar*; and *Hyndluljóð* are spoken by a female figure who is visited and interrogated by one of the gods (Óðinn in *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar* and Freyja in *Hyndluljóð*) because she possesses valuable information about past or future events that is otherwise unavailable to the Æsir. Together the three poems represent almost all the manuscripts that preserve medieval texts of eddic poems: *Codex Regius* (*Völuspá*), AM 748 I 4^{to} (*Baldrs draumar*), *Flateyjarbók* (*Hyndluljóð*), and *Hauksbók* (a second text of *Völuspá*), and as such are witness to the importance of this figure both in the composition of eddic mythological poetry and in the articulation of Old Norse mythology. Never naming herself, this figure's identity is left to the declarations and conjectures of her interlocutors, to the poems' narrators and to Snorri Sturluson, the author of *Gylfaginning* (which preserves quotations of around thirty stanzas of *Völuspá*). Yet her field of knowledge, her manner of speaking, and her attitude toward the Æsir identify the speaker in each of these poems as the same, enigmatic mythological figure known as the *völva* (prophetess, pl. *völur*) and suggest that these three poems constitute a generic sub-class of eddic mythological poetry.¹ By studying them together, and by examining the different representations of the *völva* according to the identity and mythological traits of her interlocutor, the composition of her audience, and the subject of her recitation, a clearer picture emerges of the *völva*'s function in the mythological scheme, if not of the *völva* herself, whose

presence is imagined almost exclusively as voice.

Baldrs draumar presents a dialogue between Óðinn (disguised as Vegtámr, son of Valtámr) and a *vǫlva*. She is so identified in the narrative introduction to the dialogue (Bdr. 4:4), in the introductory formulation to three of Óðinn's questions: "Þegiattu, vǫlva! Þic vil ec fregna" (Don't be silent, prophetess! I want to question you) (8:1–2, 10:1–2, and 12:1–2), as well as in his angry repudiation of her at the close of their encounter: "Ertattu vǫlva, né vǫps kona, heldr ertu Þriggia Þursa móðir" (You are not a prophetess nor a wise woman, rather you're the mother of three ogres) (13:5–8).² Despite this vituperative turn, there is no ambiguity about her identity as a *vǫlva*, although there is considerable and productive ambiguity as to cultural valence of such a figure across all three poems. The speaker of *Vǫluspá* is only identified within the poem as "ec" or "hon" ('I' or 'she') (the word *vǫlva* does occur in st. 22, but it describes Heiðr and not the speaker) and there is no title for the poem in either manuscript. The identification of the speaker as a *vǫlva* depends on the name *Vǫluspá* which is found only in the first section of Snorri's *Edda*, *Gylfaginning*, where it is repeatedly used to introduce quotations from the poem. In general, the titles of eddic mythological poems are formed by the name of one of the speakers and a noun referring to the speech-act or genre of the poem: *mál*, *qviða*, *senna*, or *bvǫt* (see Quinn, 1990b). While there is considerable play in the names of speakers of poems (the dwarf Alvpss [All-wise], for instance, or Óðinn's various *noms de guerre* used on his travels [Hávi, Grþmnr (High One, Masked One)]), the speakers of *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar* are not individualised even by a characterising nickname. The title *Vǫluspá* clearly marks the speaker as female; this is underlined by Snorri's use of a feminine pronoun when he quotes the list of dwarf-names in *Gylfaginning*: "Svá segir þ Vǫluspá ... Ok Þessi segir hon nǫfn Þeira dverganna ..." (thus it says in *Vǫluspá*.... And these she [the prophetess] says are the names of the dwarfs) (*Gylfaginning*, 15/37–8 and 16/11).³ But so general is the title *Vǫluspá* that Snorri uses it generically to refer to another *spá* (prophecy) spoken by a *vǫlva*, differentiated from the major poem he quotes by the epithet *bin skamma* (the shorter) (*Gylfaginning*, 10/15–17).

The stanza Snorri quotes from *Vǫluspá bin skamma* is also found as st. 33 of *Hyndluljóð* in *Flateyjarbók*. The editorial implications of Snorri's citation will be addressed later in this article, but for the time being it is sufficient to note that in whatever context Snorri knew this stanza, he clearly thought of it as spoken by a *vǫlva*. In the full text of *Hyndluljóð*, the speaker is addressed by Freyja as Hyndla (7:1), and is referred to by the following array of terms: "mær meyia" (girl of girls) (1:1), "mþn vina" (my friend) (1:2), "Hyndla systir" (Hyndla, sister) (1:3), "iǫtuns brúðr" (giant's bride) (4:6), "þviðia" (troll-woman) (48:2) and "brúðr iǫtuns" (bride of a giant) (50:3). In their oscillation between expressing respect or endearment and inscribing the cultural imperative of separation between the Æsir and giant-kind, these terms mirror the movements of Freyja's rhetoric of cajolement as she works to extract

Óttarr's genealogy from the distrustful Hyndla. But they also mark out the curious semantic field of the word *vǫlva*, a word that is not used in the poem itself, but which casts its shadow over it because of Snorri's citation and because of a variety of discursive and mythological characteristics of Hyndla's recitation.

In both *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð* the *vǫlva* is described as related to giants ("Þriggia Þursa móðir "[mother of three ogres] according to Óðinn [Bdr. 13:7–8] and "brúðr iǥtuns "[giant's bride] according to Freyja [Hdl. 4:6]), an association that is more fully articulated in *Vǫluspá*, where the *vǫlva* declares that she was herself raised by giants ("Ec man iǥtna, ár um borna, / Þá er forðom mic fædda hǫfðo "(I remember giants, born early, who nurtured me then) (Vsp. 2:1–4). These descriptions do not expressly assign a giant nature to the *vǫlva*, but they closely associate her with their kind, especially in the view of the Æsir, who at critical moments feel the need to polarise the classes of beings into the two camps that ultimately clash at *ragna rǫk* (the doom of the gods). The distinction between *vǫlur* and giants is also underlined in stanza 33 of *Hyndluljóð*:

Ero vǫlur allar frá Viðólfri,
vitcar allir frá Vilmeiði,
scilberendr frá Svarthǫfða, [SnE: seiðberendr]
iǥtnar allir frá Ymi komnir.

(All the prophetesses are descended from Viðólfri, all the wizards from Vilmeiðr, and the *seið*-practisers from Svarthǫfði, all the giants come from Ymir.)

By association in this stanza, all four classes of being—*vǫlur*, wizards, diviners (or *sezð*-practioners) and giants—represent the arts of magic and sorcery that the Æsir simultaneously desire access to and disavow. The *vǫlva* is not descended from Ymir, the ancestor of the giant-race, but from a distinct dynasty headed by Viðólfri (who is not elsewhere mentioned), the apparently male progenitor of this otherwise exclusively female class of beings. The specific myths of this dynasty are lost, as is the identity of the mother of them all. In the *Hauksbók* text of *Vǫluspá*, the *vǫlva* also remembers nine "þviðior"⁴ from this period of her life (2:6), a word that occurs in *Hyndluljóð* (48:2) to describe the *vǫlva*. What this word means is open to debate: "she who dwells in the woods", witch, giantess "are suggested by La Farge and Tucker (139). Since the name of the patriarch of the *vǫlur*, Viðólfri, probably means "Forest-wolf," a connection of some kind is possible,⁵ linking *vǫlur* to the wild territory of the forest and the rearing there of a breed of devouring wolves ("Austr sat in aldna þ Íárnviði / oc fceddi þar Fenris kindir "[In the east sat an old woman in Iron-wood and nurtured there offspring of Fenrir] (Vsp. 40:1–4), one of whom will destroy the sun at *ragna rǫk*. In *Gylfaginning* Snorri makes the association explicit when he identifies the nurturer of wolves as a giantess ("gýgr "14/19).

An important corollary of the relationship between *vǫlur* and giants is the common attribution of wisdom to them. The equation of the *vǫlva* with wisdom is made explicit, paradoxically, in Óðinn's line "Ertattu vǫlva, né vþs kona" (You are not a prophetess nor a wise woman) (Bdr. 13:5–6); in all three of the dialogues the *vǫlva* is characterised as possessing knowledge beyond her interlocutor. Hyndla's knowledge of genealogies is implicit in Freyja's command "Nú láttu forna niðia talða / oc upp bornar ættir manna" (Now let's count up the ancestors and the lineage of men born from them) (Hdl. 11:1–4), and the *vǫlva* of *Baldrs draumar* is petitioned by Óðinn "segðu mér ór helio —ec man or heimi" (tell me the news from hell—I know what's happening in the world) (Bdr. 6:3–4). The preeminence of the *vǫlva* in *Vǫluspá* in this regard is shown by her declaration "alt veit ec, Óðinn, hvar þú auga falt" (I know everything, Óðinn, where you hid your eye) (28:7–8) and by the description of the boundless potential of her knowledge: "sá hon vþtt oc um vþtt of verold hveria" (she saw widely, widely into all the worlds) (Vsp. 29:5–6). The extent of her knowledge is reiterated in her refrain "vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?" (do you understand yet, or not?), a point also underscored in *Baldrs draumar* in Óðinn's refrain "Þic vil ec fregna, / unz alkunna" (I want to question you, until I know everything) (Bdr. 8:2–3, 10:2–3, 12:2–3) and Hyndla's refrain "Mart segiom þér, oc munom fleira" (Much I [lit. we] have told you, I will tell you more) (Hdl. 31:1–2, 36:1–2, 39:1–2).

In the world presented by the eddic mythological poems, the knowledge of the *vǫlva* is conceived of rather differently from the knowledge of the giant. The *vǫlva*'s knowledge is essentially experiential; she expresses it through the cognitive processes of remembering and seeing, whereas the giant's knowledge, while having an experiential aspect, is chiefly sapiential, and is expressed through the cognitive process of knowing. The sequence of cognitive processes within the *spá* of *Vǫluspá* follows the chronology of the *vǫlva*'s earliest memories, through her experience of the world—the ash tree she knows, along with the actions of Heimdallr and Óðinn that she knows about—to her envisioning of the future (Jesch, 143). The following list shows the pattern of verbs of cognition within the *spá*, which is fundamentally the same in the *Codex Regius* and *Hauksbók* versions of the poem.⁶

Ec man iǫtna (I remember giants) (2:1)

nþo man ec heima (I remember nine worlds) (2:5)

Asc veit ec standa (I know an ash stands) (19:1)

Þat man hon fólcvþg (She remembers a war) Veit hon Heimdalar hliðð um fólgit (21:1)

(She knows that Heimdall's hearing is hidden) (27:1–2)

á sér hon ausaz (she sees a river pouring down) (27:5)

Sá hon valkyrior (she saw valkyries) (30:1)

Ec sá Baldri (I saw Baldr) (R31:1)

Hapt sá hon liggia (she saw a captive lying) (R35:1)

Sal sá hon standa ... Nástrǫndo á (*sér H*)

(She saw [sees *H*] a hall standing on Corpse-strand) (38:1–3)

Sá hon þar vaða (*sér H*)

(There she saw [sees *H*] wading) (39:1)
 Sér hon upp koma (She sees coming up) (59:1)
 Sal sér hon standa ... á Gimlé
 (She sees a hall standing on Gimle) (64:1–4).

Stanza 27 is pivotal in the *spá*, turning the *vǫlva*'s attention from what she knows or remembers from experience to what she sees with her prophetic powers. It is at this point, when her visions of the future are about to be divulged, that the *vǫlva* of the *Codex Regius* text directly challenges Óðinn and confirms her omniscience by revealing that she even knows about the private pledge of one of his eyes at Mǫpmir's well (Vsp. 28).

The narrative frame of the poem, as distinct from the *spá* itself, presents a different set of verbs, which can be roughly divided into two subsets: one elaborating the cognitive processes of the prophecy, and one describing the physical encounter between the *vǫlva* and Óðinn (roughly, because the physical action of the poem depends so much on verbal delivery and its reception). The latter subset is indented in the following list:

Hlióðs bið ec allar (Attention I ask from all) (1:1)
 vildo at ec ... vel fyrtelia forn spiǫ ll fira, þau er fremst um man
 (you wish that I should declare the ancient histories of men ... ,
 those which I remember from the first) (1:5–8)
 vitoð ér enn, eða hvat? (do you understand yet, or what?)
 (27:8, 28:14, 33:8, 35:8, 39:10, 41:8, 48:8, 62:8, 63:6)
 Ein sat hon úti (Alone she sat outside) (R28:1)
 Þá er inn aldni kom ... oc þ augo leit
 (when the old man came ... and looked in her eyes) (R28:2–4)
 Hvers fregnit mic? (To what end do you question me?) (R28:5)
 hvþ freistið mþ n? (Why do you test me?) (R28:6)
 alt veit ec, Óðinn, hvar þú auga falt
 (I know everything, Óðinn, where you hid your eye) (R28:7–8)
 Valði henni Herfǫ ðr hringa oc men (R29:1–2)
 (Father of Hosts chose for her rings and necklaces)
 fecc⁷ spiǫ ll spaclig oc spáganda (R29:3–4)
 (he got wise speech and a rod of divination)
 sá hon vþtt oc um vþtt of verold hveria (R29:5–6)
 (she saw widely, widely into all the worlds)
 fiolð veit hon fræða, fram sé ec lengra
 (much wisdom she knows, I see further ahead)
 (44:5–6, 49:5–6, 58:5–6)
framm sé ec lengra, fiolð kann ec segia (H)
(I see further, much can I say)
 nú mun hon sœqvaz (Now she must sink down) (66:8)

Verbs of seeing and saying predominate, especially in the *Hauksbók* version of the poem. In the *Codex Regius* text, the relationship of the *vǫlva* with Óðinn is rather different, a point I shall return to after looking at how the knowledge of the other *vǫlur* differs from that of the giants.

The *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar* provides Óðinn with details of Baldr's death and its avenging in a series of three narrative tableaux:

Hér stendr Baldri of brugginn miðr
schrar veigar, liggir sciðldr yfir,
enn ásmegir þ ofvæni ... 7:1–6

(Here the mead stands, brewed for Baldr, the shining liquid, a shield hangs above, and anxiety over the Æsir ...)

HQðr berr hávan hróðrbarm þinig;
hann man Baldri at bana verða
oc Óðins son aldri ræna ... 9:1–6

(HQðr will dispatch the famous warrior to this place; he will be Baldr's killer and steal the life from Óðinn's son ...)

Rindr berr *Vála* þ vestrsqlom,
sá man Óðins sonr einnætr vega;
hQnd um þvæf né hQfuð kembir,
áðr á bál um berr Baldrs andscota ... 11:1–8

(Rindr will give birth to Váli in western halls, Óðinn's son will fight when one night old; he won't wash his hands nor comb his hair, until he's brought to the pyre Baldr's enemy ...)

Although the *vQlva* does not phrase her information in terms of a vision (by using a verb of perception such as “ec sér ”[I see]), what she describes are events that have not yet happened in the time frame of the poem, at which point Baldr is alive and well but having baleful dreams. In this her knowledge is similar to the *VQluspá* *vQlva*'s knowledge of future events, moving proleptically to *ragna rQk*, the demise of the gods: “oc ragna rQc riúfendr koma ”(and the Doom of the Gods, tearing all asunder, approaches) (Bdr. 14:7–8) and “fram sé ec lengra urn ragna rQc, rQmm, sigtýva ”(I see further ahead to the terrible doom of the fighting gods) (Vsp. 44:6–8, 49:6–8, 58:6–8).

Although she does not use the phrase *ragna rQk*, Hyndla's knowledge also extends to those cataclysmic events. Her description of the apocalyptic weather that is the culmination of *ragna rQk* is comparable to the description of the earth sinking into the sea in *VQluspá* (57:2), except that there the emphasis is on an inferno rather than a blizzard:

Haf gengr hrþðom við himin siálfan,
lþðr lQnd yfir, enn lopt bilar;
þaðan koma snióvar oc snarir vindar;
ðá er þ ráði, at regn um þrióti. Hdl. 42

(The ocean stirs up storms against heaven itself, washes over the land, and the air yields; from there comes snow and biting winds; then it is decreed that the gods come to their end.)

Hyndla's knowledge extends back in time as well. She knows the ancestry of the gods back through Baldr and Óðinn to Burr (30:1–2) and of the giants

back to Ymir (33:7–8), but since the subject of her recitation is genealogy, the knowledge she has is expressed as details of lineage rather than description of events, as the *Vǫluspá* *vǫlva*'s is. Like the *Vǫluspá* *vǫlva* in her refrain (“vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?”) (do you understand yet, or not?), Hyndla draws attention to how much more extensive her knowledge is—

Mart segiom Þér oc munom fleira,
vǫromz, at viti svá, viltu enn lengra? Hdl.31:1–4, 36:1–4, 39:1–4

(Much I have told you, I will tell you more, it's important that you know it, do you want to know more?)

—yet at the end of her recitation she expresses unwillingness to speak all that she knows:

áá kemr annarr, enn mátcari,
Þó Þori ec eigi þann at nefna;
fáir siá nú fram um lengra,
enn Óðinn man úlfi mæta. Hdl. 44

(Then will come another, even mightier, though I do not dare to name his name; few can now see further than when Óðinn will meet the wolf.)

The circumstances under which a *vǫlva* is willing to tell all appear to be met in *Vǫluspá* but not in *Hyndluljóð*, for reasons that are not spelled out in either poem, but which presumably have to do with the mythological and discursive play of power between the actors in each of the poems.

From the evidence of Óðinn's interrogation of Vafþrúðnir in *Vafþrúðnismál*, it is apparent that giants also know the details of *ragna rǫk* and the new world that follows it, as well as the early history of their race, and the creation of the world. When asked by Óðinn “hvat þú fyrst mant eða fremst um veizt” (what you first remember or what you know to be earliest) (Vm. 34:4–5), Vafþrúðnir makes a distinction between his experiential memory, and his store of acquired knowledge. He has already answered questions about the creation of the first giant out of the poison drops of élivágar (Vm. 31:1–3), who generates offspring under his armpits and by one leg with the other (Vm. 33). This first giant, whose name he gives as Aurgelmir, is the father of Þrúðgelmir and the grandfather of Bergelmir, who was born innumerable winters before the creation of the earth (Vm. 29). In answer to Óðinn's question, Vafþrúðnir reveals that his first memory as a young giant was the funeral⁸ of Bergelmir:

Ørófi vetra, áðr væri iǥrð um scǥpuð,
þá var Bergelmir borinn;
þat ec fyrst um man, er sá inn fróði iǥtunn
var á luðr um lagiðr. Vm. 35

(Uncountable winters before the world was made, then Bergelmir was born; that I remember first when the wise giant was laid on his bier.)

The *Vǫluspá vǫlva*, on the other hand, seems to represent herself as remembering back as far as the time when Ymir lived (apparently the same figure as Aurgelmir), although the sequence of sts. 2 and 3 of the poem may not necessarily be chronological.

An important characteristic that sets the *vǫlva* apart from her giant allies-in-wisdom is her availability to the Æsir after death, to be summoned from her grave to describe events from any period in the history of the world. The *vǫlva* of *Baldrs draumar* is long dead, her grave covered in snow, beaten with rain and soaked with dew (Bdr. 5:5–8). She can only be roused to speak her “nás orð ”(corpse-words) through the performance of magic incantations which raise the dead (4:5–8), and which Óðinn is clearly adept at conducting. Óðinn knew the grave where the *vǫlva* lay, east of the gate to Hel’s house down in Niflhel, presumably one of the sites of wisdom beyond Æsir territory where he had to journey in times of dire need for knowledge. Hyndla is described as living in a cave (Hdl. 1:4) and riding a wolf (5:1). She is unenthusiastic about obliging Freyja, but she is not dead. We know less about the *Vǫluspá vǫlva* except that the description of her sinking down at the end of her recitation (Vsp. 66:8) is in line with a necromantic performance such as in *Baldrs draumar*, and it seems reasonable to assume she was understood to be dead (McKinnell, 116). The description in st. 28 of *Vǫluspá*, of the *vǫlva* sitting out alone when Óðinn came and looked into her eyes, is also associated with the practice of magic (Gering and Sijmons, 37–8).

Another distinction between the *vǫlva*’s knowledge and that of the giants is the manner in which it is formulated and presented. In all three poems, the *vǫlva* presents information in the pattern of a chronological narrative, although this is more apparent in the monologic form of the *spá* in *Vǫluspá* or in the genealogy of *Hyndluljóð* (which moves backwards in time, but along lines of descent) than in the short answer dialogue of *Baldrs draumar*, in which Óðinn asks the *vǫlva* for details of Baldr’s death, his killer, and then his avenger (see Pàroli). *Vafþrúðnir*, by contrast, poses questions to Óðinn according to topic—“hvé X heitir ”(what is X called) in the first round of the wisdom contest—and he is questioned by Óðinn in the same manner with “hvaðan X um kom ”(whence comes X), with some variations, in the second. The giant appears to be able to pose or answer questions on any topic in any order, with the knowledge he possesses formulated as facts (expressed using “vera ”and “heita”) rather than as stories. In the third round, Óðinn focuses on the events of *ragna rǫk* and its aftermath, and the answers change to predictions.

In order to win the wisdom contest, Óðinn must ask a question the giant cannot answer. The question—“hvat mælti Óðinn, áðr á bálstigi, siál-fr þ eyra syni? ”(what did Óðinn say into the ear of his son before he mounted the pyre?)—represents an interesting area of knowledge from which giants are apparently precluded, perhaps because only the speaker and hearer can know this. It is nonetheless on the public record for giants what Óðinn’s Einheriar

do every day in preparation for the final battle (Vm. 41); that Óðinn is swallowed by a wolf at *ragna røk* (Vm. 53); and that he is not one of the Æsir who will people the new world after it (Vm. 51). It is tempting to think a *vǫlva* would have been able to answer Óðinn's final question, since it is within her sphere of knowledge to know about "veð Valfǫðrs" (Father-of-the-Slain's pledge), the presumably secret pledge Óðinn made of his eye at the well of Mímir in order to have access to its store of wisdom. But as we shall see, there were also questions Óðinn could pose to a *vǫlva* that she could not answer because of their epistemological formulation.

The *vǫlva* characterises her knowledge as "forn spjóll" (ancient histories) (Vsp. 1:7, as does the narrator 29:3), whereas Vafþrúðnir is famous for his mastery of "forn stafr" (ancient matters) (Vm. 1:5, 55:5), "rúnar" (secrets) (42:4, 43:1) and "orðspeki" (wisdom) (55:8), descriptions of his wisdom that all share a conceptualisation of knowledge as information transformed and reified, a specialised form of wisdom that must be actively pursued.⁹ Vafþrúðnir reveals that he has acquired this wisdom through travelling to nine worlds (Vm. 43)—presumably the same as those that the *Vǫluspá* *vǫlva* (Vsp. 2) remembers from long ago (McKinnell, 115)—and in particular the world of the dead below Niflhel, the world where the *vǫlva* of *Baldrs draumar* has her resting place by the eastern gate. This is the source of knowledge, to which both giants and Óðinn go for their raw material, which then forms the stuff of their male-to-male contests. The exchange in *Baldrs draumar* suggests that when Óðinn needed information urgently he went directly to an inhabitant of this world, a dead *vǫlva*; *Vǫluspá* suggests that when he wanted to hear the whole story, rather than answers to quiz questions, he went directly to a *vǫlva*. The *vǫlva* never travels, she is always journeyed to, with the site of interrogation always being on her home turf. She likewise never tests her knowledge, conceived as she is as a psyche retaining all the happenings of the world, without need of question-and-answer testing in order to memorise and reproduce it. Her recitations are always cast in *fornyrðislag*, the metre used for narration in the eddic corpus, as distinct from the *ljóðaháttir* metre the giants and Óðinn use when they contest gnomes and other formulated kinds of knowledge (Quinn 1992, 106–7). The direct and apparently unstudied quality of her intellect in no way diminishes its value in the Old Norse mythological system: in fact both memory and far-sightedness are cited in the list of *heiti* for wisdom in Snorri's *Edda*.¹⁰ The way the *Vǫluspá* *vǫlva* tells her story with regard to Óðinn's acute interest in the events of the future displays an artful kind of shadow-boxing compared to the giant's slap-happy competitiveness in *Vafþrúðnismál*.¹¹

Just as the *vǫlva*'s knowledge is portrayed as latent, so too her being is represented as passive and inert. If, as Clunies Ross has argued (1994, 82), there are three pairs of terms that represent the organisational structures of Old Norse myths—nature and culture, female and male, disorder and order—then the *vǫlva* can be read as an incarnation of the association between the

feminine, death, and the disorderly world of wolves, forests, and the future. The concentration in her person of so many negatively-valued aspects of the mythological system has the effect of condensing her representation to that of a type rather than a named individual. Like the *gýgr*, or the unnamed giantess who makes occasional appearances in eddic poems (Vsp. 42, Vm. 32, *Hymiskviða* 14, *Helreið Brynhildar* 14 and in *Gylfaginning* (14/19), the *vǫlva* is a functionary of the mythological system. Unlike giantesses, however, who are mortal, the *vǫlva* is represented as already dead (or in Hyndla's case, asleep) but perpetually accessible. She gives voice to the knowledge that is conceived of as vested in the dead and among giants, but sometimes in the elaboration of the circumstances of her recital she is embodied beyond her voice, and other strands of the mythological web of associations are brought into play.

Both giant and *vǫlva* play an important part in the Old Norse mythological scheme as repositories of wisdom: just as the type of knowledge they have is differentiated according to gender, so too were the rules they had to play by when they were summoned to exhibit their knowledge. A comparison of the opening exchanges of *Vafþrúðnismál* (sts. 6–11) and *Baldrs draumar* (sts. 3–6)—after the narrative has delivered Óðinn to each of his interlocutors' homes—makes this clear. When meeting the giant, Óðinn greets him (Vm. 6), and declares his mission: is the giant wise, or does he know everything?¹² In response, *Vafþrúðnir* rises to the challenge, immediately pronouncing this a life-and-death contest between quiz champions (st. 7). The *vǫlva* on the other hand, sinks away from what is no challenge to her, but an intensely physical trial (Bdr. 5). The niceties of hospitality insisted on by Óðinn in giantland (Vm. 8) are not mentioned to the *vǫlva*, presumably because it is only the dead who are offered a welcoming beer in Hel (Bdr. 7). Once he has identified himself, Óðinn gets straight to the matter of his enquiry (st. 6), and the *vǫlva* answers directly, but reluctantly, attempting to terminate the interview after each successive reply.

The giant is in an altogether different rhetorical mood. Warming to the excitement of the challenge, he invites his guest to sit down (Vm. 11), so they can begin to “freista ”(contest), the verb repeatedly used to describe the interaction between speakers in a wisdom contest (see Ruggerini, 160). Óðinn too is in a more expansive mood, and pauses to utter a gnome as he reflects on his situation (Vm. 10).¹³ There is a certain contrived *bonhomie* between the god and the giant as they measure each other up, which is entirely absent from Óðinn's fraught encounter with the *vǫlva*. The two poems dramatise different aspects of mythological time. In the opening stanzas of *Vafþrúðnismál*, Óðinn is pictured as sitting at home with his wife, curious about the reputed wisdom of the giant *Vafþrúðnir*, and eager to test himself against him. Frigg is mindful of the danger of leaving “*garðr goða* ”(the court of the gods) to travel into the territory of a giant known for his unequalled physical strength (Ruggerini, 146), but fulfils her wifely duty by giving supportive advice and bidding him

a safe journey (Vm. 2, 4). There is no specific information Óðinn is seeking in this mission, simply the reassuring experience of still being able to outsmart the wisest of the giants, or in McKinnell's interpretation of the poem, of "testing whether Fate is as immutable as it seems" (102). Frigg tacitly acknowledges the need for Óðinn to reassure himself, a need for intelligence which is a chronic affliction for Óðinn up until *ragna røk*. The success of Óðinn's mission—in which he won his contest with the giant, but presumably learnt nothing he did not already know—is indicated by Vafþrúðnir's declaration of defeat at the end of the poem; although the narrative frame is not concluded, his victory implies his safe restoration home to "garðr goða".

The *mise-en-scène* of *Baldrs draumar* is a much more specific moment in mythic time, when a crisis arises which the gods have to call an urgent meeting to discuss. The opening of the poem ("Senn vóro æsir allir á Þingi/ oc ásynior allar á máli" [All together the Æsir came in council / and all the Asynior to speak together], Bdr. 1:1–4) describes a narrative moment similar to the series of crises recounted in *Völuspá*: "Þá gengo regin qil á rQC-stóla, / ginnheilög goð, oc um þat gættuz" (Then all the Powers went to the thrones of fate, / the sacrosanct gods, and considered this) (sts. 6, 9, 23, 25). Óðinn makes a different kind of journey in this situation, to the world of the dead, not of giants, to find out specific information: "segðu mér ór helio" (tell me the news from hell) (Bdr. 6:3). The animosity between Óðinn and the *völva* is intense. In her first response the *völva* does more than answer Óðinn's question, she spells out the implications of Baldr's death for the gods: "enn ásmegir þ ofvæni" (and the Æsir in anxiety) (7:5–6). Having discovered who his son's murderer will be, and who will avenge him, Óðinn has accomplished all he can from the mission. In an interesting variation on his strategy in *Vafþrúðnismál*,¹⁴ Óðinn asks the *völva* a riddle,¹⁵ the kind of formulated, sapiential wisdom giants and male seers are adept at trading, but which is beyond the experiential scope of the *völva* whose expertise is the world of the dead.¹⁶ Just as asking about Óðinn's words spoken into the dead Baldr's ear changes the ground rules of the quiz and disqualifies the giant from further contest, so too a riddle rules out an answer from the *völva* because it is beyond her epistemological and discursive ken. Although the *völva* is less gracious in defeat than the giant, neither of them are any match for Óðinn, the master of the discursive feint in any eddic situation.¹⁷

In the following stanza, the *völva* unmasks Vegtamr/Óðinn (Bdr. 13:1–2), and in retaliation, he attempts to unmask her.¹⁸ In so doing, he reveals that the root of his antipathy towards her is her association with giants, (whose eventual victory over the gods, Óðinn knows [*Gylfaginning* 46/14–15; tr. Faulkes 1987, 49], becomes ineluctable after Baldr's death):

Etattu vqlva, né vps kona,
heldr ertu Þriggia þursa móðir. Bdr. 13:3–4

(You are not a prophetess nor a wise woman, rather you're the mother of three

Óðinn's trick question leads Vafþrúðnir to capitulate, but the mythological terms of his encounter with the *vǫlva* are different. Once she has discovered that it is Óðinn who has raised her from her grave, her irritation finds its focus in a taunt:

Heim rþð þú, Óðinn, oc ver hróðigr!
 Svá komit manna meirr aptr á vit,
 er lauss Loki lþör ór bǫndom
 oc ragna rǫc riúfendr koma. Bdr. 14

(Ride home, Óðinn, and be proud of yourself! No more men will come to visit me, until Loki is loose, escaped from his bonds and the Doom of the Gods, tearing all asunder, approaches.)

Originally sought out as an expert on the world of the dead, the *vǫlva* also demonstrates a knowledge of the gods' impending destruction at *ragna rǫk*, when Loki—linked in other sources with the treacherous killing of Baldr—will steer one of the ships bearing down on the gods (Vsp. 51). The poem ends in the mode of a senna, with the gods and their nemesis locked in abusive exchange. Whereas in *Lokasenna* it is Loki himself who taunts the gods and goddesses about *ragna rǫk* (sts. 42, 58, 65), here the *vǫlva* assumes that role, and justifies Óðinn's assumption that she is aligned with the enemies of the gods. Although the *vǫlva* declares that this is the last interview she will give, Óðinn has already learned what he wished to know, though it brings him little joy. The vectors and stages of *ragna rǫk* are more fully articulated now, but as Loki says to Þórr at the end of *Lokasenna* “Lifa ætla ec mér langan aldr, / Þóttu hætir hamri mér” (I intend to live for a good time yet, / though you threaten me with a hammer) (Ls. 62:1–3). The gods too live a long time with the knowledge of *ragna rǫk*, and it is during this period—termed the mythic present by Clunies Ross (1994, 237)—that the eddic mythological poems are all set, several of them making specific reference to Baldr's death (Vm. 54, Ls. 28, Vsp. 31–33).

The eddic mythological poems portray a number of dramatic situations in which Óðinn's anxiety about the future is played out, and a number of different ways in which his ambivalent position of dependence and antipathy towards the *vǫlva* is figured. *Baldrs draumar* dramatises the moment of crisis when Baldr first becomes the site of Æsir vulnerability, while *Vǫluspá* treats the series of crises the Æsir face in the unfolding drama of the world, from its beginnings to its end. The *Codex Regius* version of *Vǫluspá* narrates Baldr's death within a series of stanzas which focuses on Óðinn (Vsp. 28–33), and describes in more detail his encounter with the *vǫlva* (Vsp. 28–9). The *Hauksbók* version only mentions the narrative context of the *spá* in the first and last stanzas, and does not focus on Baldr's death, making only an allusive reference to the vengeful action against Loki, following the account of the

Æsir-Vanir war (Vsp. 21–4).¹⁹ This is immediately followed by the baying of Garmr and the crowing of the cocks, suggesting that it is this event that precipitates *ragna røk*, but its personal implications for Óðinn are not brought to the fore in the *Hauksbók* version.

Óðinn's relationship with the *vǫlva* is figured differently in all three of the texts where he directly encounters her: the *Codex Regius* text of *Vǫluspá*, the *Hauksbók* text of *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*. In *Baldrs draumar*, Óðinn places himself at considerable risk by his action of riding down to the world of the dead, where the bloodied hound barks at him and the earth resounds; it is a world from which few return.²⁰ Having placed himself in geographical jeopardy, Óðinn further jeopardises his status by compromising his masculinity in the performance of “*valgaldr*” (a corpse-reviving spell). In *Ynglingasaga* the use of *seiðr* (magic) is said to be accompanied by such effeminacy that it is taught to the female *ásynjur* (goddesses) rather than male deities, although Óðinn continues to practise it (Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* 1:19). And it is just this kind of behavior that makes Loki declare “*oc hugða ec þat args aðal*” (and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert) (Ls. 24:6) after he reveals that Óðinn has himself taken on the guise of a *vǫlva* and carried out her magic acts in *Sámsey*. The poem therefore presents a fraught situation, in which Óðinn has particular reason to distinguish himself from the *vǫlva* and re-establish his credentials as both *áss* (god) and male. It is perhaps little wonder that his interview with her should end in trickery and abuse, and that her antipathy towards him should be aroused to the point of retaliation, at least rhetorically.

In *Vǫluspá*, Óðinn and the *vǫlva* respond to each other rather differently, for reasons that are not made explicit in the poem. The action in most of the eddic mythological poems is constituted by speech, ranging in style from monologic recitation (*Hávamál* and *Grímnismál*), to dialogue as formal stanzaic exchange with two (*Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvissmál*) or more (*Lokasenna*) speakers, to speech quoted between stanzas of narrative (*Þrymskviða*). The degree to which the dramatic situation that the eddic speakers enact is elaborated varies between poems—some texts telling readers of the late-twentieth century bafflingly little (*Hávamál*), others adumbrating narrative context through verbal exchange (*Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvissmál*) and others framing speech with prose explanation (*Grímnismál* and *Lokasenna*) and interleaved prose commentary between stanzas (*Skírnismál* and *Vǫlundarkviða*). Whereas *Baldrs draumar* is a blend of the formal styles of *Þrymskviða* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, having a narrative introduction followed by a dialogue, *Vǫluspá* has an analogue of sorts in the so-called *Loddáfírnismál* section of *Hávamál* (sts. 111–37), where a monologue is directed to a named addressee, but where details of the dramatic circumstances of the delivery are obscure.²¹

For reasons we can only guess at, the *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá* has all the confidence of a court poet,²² addressing her patron and the assembled

audience of listeners:

Hliðs bið ec allar helgar kindir,
meiri oc minni, mǫgo Heimdalar;
vildo, at ec, Valfǫðr, vel fýrtelia
forn spíðll fira, þau er fremst um man. Vsp. 1

(Attention I ask from all the sacred people, greater and lesser, the offspring of Heimdall; Father of the Slain, you wish that I should declare the ancient histories of men, those which I remember from the first.)

What is more, according to st. 29 of the *Codex Regius* text, Óðinn is so keen for her to perform he gives her rings and necklaces, odd gifts, one would have thought, for a woman already in the grave.²³ Nonetheless, the one who sinks down in st. 66 seems ready to accept such gifts in st. 29, and perhaps more significantly, Óðinn is willing to offer them (Nordal, 59–60), just as he apparently suffers in silence when she makes her revelation of his pledge of an eye a stanza earlier. What is telling about their interaction is its similarity to a wisdom contest, particularly in the speakers' apparently equal footing. The *vǫlva* is not raised from a grave by Óðinn, rather she is pictured as sitting out alone when he visits her, and he gazes into her eyes. She in fact uses the term “freista” to describe Óðinn's attitude to their interaction, but she does so with a certain disdain—“Hvers fregnit mic, hvþ freistið mþn?/ alt veit ec, Óðinn ...”(Why do you question me? Why do you test me? I know everything, Óðinn) (Vsp. 28:5–7). She also warns Óðinn that previous attempts to destroy a *vǫlva*—the figure Gullveig who is repeatedly tortured and burnt “þ hǫll Hárs”(in the hall of the High One) (21:5) and who is known as a *vǫlva* among humans (Vsp. 22:3)—have been futile because the *vǫlva* is immortal: “Þó hon enn lifir”(yet she lives still) (21:10).

The potential antagonism between *vǫlva* and *áss* that is inscribed in their encounter is not played out. Rather than taunting Óðinn with the awful events of *ragna rǫk*, the *vǫlva* displays a certain sensitivity to his feelings in her euphemistic description of his death—“Þá mun Friggjar falla angan”(then the beloved of Frigg must fall) (Vsp. 53:7–8), and solemnly describes its avenging: “Þá kǫmr inn micli mogr Sigfǫður ... Þá er hefnt fǫður”(Then the great son of War-father advances ... then his father is avenged) (Vsp. 55:1–8). In performing before an audience which includes human as well as divine listeners, and in being imagined as enjoying gifts of jewellery, the *Vǫluspá* *vǫlva* has more in common with the human *vǫlva* who is described in saga literature²⁴ than she does with the *vǫlva* of *Baldurs draumar* who has no audience apart from *Vegtamr* and who is more revenant than woman.

The apparent inconsistency in the two main poems involving a *vǫlva* in the medieval Icelandic eddic corpus in fact bespeaks an important condition of their preservation. Unlike a written *œuvre*, in which a single author has conceived the manner of engagement between characters and the background of their relationship, the oral transmission of eddic poems and their diffuse

preservation (singly in various manuscripts as well as in anthologies) reveal a different cultural mode of expression. The *vǫlva* embodies the power of narrative visualization and has the potential to articulate a detailed history of the world, at least to the extent that the *Æsir*-centric conceptualization of her will allow. She has been differently imagined in individual poems because the pulses of cultural value and anxiety have been played out apparently without self-conscious regard for what Óðinn and a *vǫlva* may have been recorded as saying elsewhere.

This is nowhere more apparent than in *Vǫluspá hin skamma*, the poem Snorri knew but which no one can now identify with any certainty. Snorri's citation of st. 33 of *Hyndluljóð* as belonging to a poem called *Vǫluspá hin skamma* has had a powerful effect on editors of the poem, who, following Sophus Bugge, have dissected sts. 29–44 of *Hyndluljóð* as a separate poem, although the manuscript marks no such divisions. Before turning to the relationship of *Hyndluljóð* with the other poems representing a dialogue with a *vǫlva*, this and one other editorial intervention into the text need to be discussed.

An argument for the unity of *Hyndluljóð* can be made on both formal and thematic grounds (Steinsland, 461–94). There is no indication in the text that the speaker of sts. 29–44 is other than Hyndla, and st. 29 is knitted by its refrain to the previous run of stanzas that all end with the line “alt er þat ætt þþn, Óttarr heimsci ”(all these are your ancestors, Óttarr the foolish). The second refrain—“Mart segiom þér oc munom fleira,/ vǫromz, at viti svá, viltu enn fleira? ”(Much I have told you, I will tell you more,/ it's important that you know it, do you want to know more?) (sts.31, 34, 36 and 39)—echoes the earlier repeated line “varðar, at viti svá, viltu enn lengra? ”(it's important that you know it, do you want to know more?) (sts. 17 and 18), another sign of textual cohesion throughout the extant poem. Thematically, too, the poem is of one cloth, although its pattern is based on eddic mythological design rather than modern notions of literary unity. Hyndla's recitation is of ancient lineages, focussed on the genealogy of Óttarr, but its scope encompasses dynastic connections to other lines, as well as the tracing of each ancestral line to its progenitor. Freyja's instructions to Hyndla are quite explicit in this regard:

Nú láttu forna niðia talða
oc upp bornar ættir manna:
hvat er Skiǫldunga, hvat er Scilfinga,
hvat er Qðlinga, hvat er Ylfinga,
hvat er hǫlðborit, hvat er hersborit,
mest manna val und miðgarði? Hdl. 11

(Now let's count up the ancestors and the lineage of men born from them: which are of the Skiǫldungs, which are of the Skilfings, which are of the Qðlings, which are of the Ylfings, which are born of farming stock, which are born of fighting stock, the greatest choice of men on the face of the earth?)

This list is repeated by Hyndla five stanzas later (“Þaðan ero Sciǫldungar” [From them come the Skiǫldungs]), ending with the refrain “alt er Þat ætt Þþn, Óttarr heimsci” (all these are your ancestors, Óttarr the foolish) (Hdl. 16). Hyndla lists the heroes who have come from these dynasties (“enn Eylimi frá Qðlingom” [and Eylimi of the Qðlings], 26:5–6) as well as the founders of other dynasties (“iǫtnar allir frá Ymi komnir” [all the giants come from Ymir], 33:7–8), including the extraordinary circumstances in which the line of *flagð* (troll-women) began when Loki conceived after eating a half-cooked woman’s heart (Hdl. 41). Again these patterns are threaded across the supposed seam (st. 28/ st. 29) where *Vǫluspá hin skamma* is purported to have been interpolated into *Hyndluljóð*. It was a commonplace in medieval Icelandic culture to trace genealogies back through human history deep into the mythological past, as *Ynglinga saga* and many other texts testify (Krag). The transition between sts. 28 and 29 of *Hyndluljóð* is of precisely this nature (Ólason, 98), as Hyndla moves from Óttarr’s divinely-blessed ancestors —“Þeir vóro gumnar goðom signaðir” (they were men blessed by the gods) (28:9–10) to those who were themselves divine —“Vóro ellifo Æsir talðir” (Eleven were the Æsir when all counted up) (29:1–2); “alt er Þat ætt Þþn, Óttarr heimsci” (all these are your ancestors, Óttarr the foolish) (28:11–12 and 29:9–10). Freyja’s original request was for information about “ættir... gumna þeira er frá goðom qvómo” (lineage of ... those men who are descended from the gods) (8:4– 6), and already in Hyndla’s account of Óttarr’s parents’ and grand-parents’ generations (20:3–4), she indicates that her genealogical wisdom stretches much further back: “fyrnd er sú mægð, fram tel ec lengra” (forgotten is that kinship; I can recite further back) (Hdl. 20:5–6). The voice of the *vǫlva* sounds in these words, as it does in the question posed in the sixth stanza of her recitation: “viltu enn lengra?” (do you want to know more?) (Hdl. 17:8), which is repeated five times in the rest of the poem. It is also appar-ent that Hyndla’s knowledge, like a *vǫlvd*’s, is experiential: “kunna ec báða Brodd oc Hǫrvi” (I knew both Brodd and Horvir) (Hdl. 20:7–8, 25:1–2).

The stanza Snorri quotes from *Hyndluljóð*, and which he identifies as spoken by a *vǫlva*, deals with genealogical origins, indicating that such a subject was regarded as falling within the sphere of knowledge of such a speaker. What may have induced editors of *Hyndluljóð* to identify a section of it as another poem is their supposition that the poem Snorri referred to as *Vǫluspá hin skamma* must have been very short. This is not necessarily warranted, as the poem the *Codex Reginus* compiler refers to as *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* (at the end of the prose introduction to the poem that is in fact entitled simply *kviða Sigurðar*) is 71 stanzas long, though it was presumably shorter than the poem about Sigurðr copied earlier in the manuscript (either one now entirely lost in the lacuna, or the one that survives only as a fragment, the so-called *Brot* [Fragment]). By referring to the poem as *Vǫluspá hin skamma*, Snorri may simply have been acknowledging that he was quoting

from a source separate from *Vǫluspá*, distinguished from it by its shorter length. As it is preserved, *Vǫluspá* is 62 stanzas long (59 in the *Hauksbók* text) while *Hyndluljóð* is 50 stanzas long.

That *Hyndluljóð* and *Vǫluspá hin skamma* may have been names for the same poetic entity (Boer, 254) is lent some support by the different names for other poems across manuscripts. *Codex Regius* gives the title *Fǫr Scprnis* for the poem that in AM 748 I 4^o is called *Scprnis mál*. The rubric to *Hyndluljóð* in *Flateyjarbók* is in fact “Hér hefr upp hyndlu *hlióð* qveðit um ottar heimsca”²⁵ (italics mine), which may not involve the error editors have presumed when emending the second element in the title to *lióð* (song).²⁶ A *hlióð* is what the *Vǫluspá* *vǫlva* asks for at the beginning of her delivery (Vsp. 1:1), and the notion of a ‘listening’ or ‘audience’ is not so distant in sense from that of ‘recitation’ or ‘announcement of prophecy’ which the generic term *spá* denotes, especially in the oral world in which both poems are set. The divergence between the titles *Vǫluspá* and *Hyndluljóð* is therefore one of generic focus: between *spá* and *ljóð* (or *hlióð*) on the one hand, and between the speaker’s identity as Hyndla or as a *vǫlva* on the other. The stanza Snorri quotes from the poem begins “Eru vǫlur allar frá Viðólfi” (*Gylfaginning*, 10), which brings the speaker’s identity as a *vǫlva* into the foreground, although the quotation of this stanza and the following ones (*Vafþrúðnismál* sts. 30–1) is used as corroboration of Snorri’s statement that Ymir is the ancestor of all the giants.

A second editorial intervention in the text of *Hyndluljóð* that bears reconsideration is the dialogue between Freyja and Hyndla that closes the narrative frame in the last six stanzas of the poem. The speakers are not indicated in the manuscript, but the sense of the stanzas and the repeated refrain—“hleypr Þú, eðlvina, úti á náttom,/ sem með hǫfðum Heiðrún fari” (you gallop, noble lady, out into the night,/ as Heidrun runs in heat among the he-goats), in which Hyndla defames Freyja by imputing to her the sexual profligacy of a she-goat—makes attribution fairly straightforward: Freyja speaks a single stanza (45) that prompts a speech of four stanzas by Hyndla (46–9), answered by a single stanza from Freyja (50). Curiously, stanza 48 has been emended and attributed to Freyja in most modern editions of the poem.²⁷ Manuscript ‘af’ is emended to ‘of’ in stanza 48:2 (first made in the Arnarnagðan edition of the eddic poems of 1787–1828) and Hyndla’s refrain is deleted from this stanza and the following one (sts. 48 and 49). Unemended, the manuscript text of stanza 48 is as follows:

Ec slæ eldi af þviðio,
svá at Þú ei kemz á burt heðan.
hleypr Þú, eðlvina úti á náttom,
sem með hǫfðum Heiðrún fari

(I will cast fire from the troll-woman, so that you can never get away from here;
you gallop, noble lady, out into the night, as Heidrun runs in heat among the he-goats).

In order to determine if the emendation is warranted (yielding ‘I will cast fire *around* the troll-woman’), it is first necessary to decide which speaker is most likely to be threatening the other with fire, and what the probable location of this encounter is—since the speaker is using fire to try and prevent her interlocutor from getting away. The physical actions of Freyja and Hyndla are never directly narrated in the poem, only implied in the course of their speech. Freyja’s initial command to Hyndla is to ride with her to Valhǫll (Hdl. 1), apparently as part of her delegation to win favour for Ottarr—disguised as a boar upon which Freyja is riding—from Óðinn and the gods. We are not told what Hyndla’s role was to be at Valhǫll, but perhaps she was to present Óttarr’s lineage before the gods as a formal recitation, much as the *vǫlva* does for Óðinn and the assembled company of men in *Vǫluspá*. Steinsland (463) has argued that the scene in Valhǫll probably represents a sacred initiation rite for a future king. We are later told that Óttarr has made a pact with Angantýr that in three mornings’ time they will recite their respective lineages (Hdl. 9 and 45). Ottarr’s “fǫðurleifð ”(patrimony) (9:7) is at stake, and it has been suggested that his legal right of succession may also have depended on establishing his lineage (see Gurevich). Freyja’s intervention on behalf of her human favourite involves two strategies: to find out from Hyndla his genealogy so that Óttarr can prove a superior lineage to Angantýr’s, and to win the gods’ favour for Óttarr, presumably to ensure his succession and inheritance (Fleck).

Things do not go as Freyja planned. Hyndla quickly sees through Óttarr’s disguise, declaring Freyja’s mount too slow to travel the road to the gods and refusing to saddle her wolf as ordered (Hdl. 5:5–8). When she exposes the boar’s identity as Freyja’s lover, Hyndla specifically locates the odd couple on the road to the slain (Hl 6:5–6), a location Freyja repeats (Hdl. 7:3–4). Like the *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar*, Hyndla is located at the periphery of the world of the dead, and is reluctant to move. Hyndla’s exposure of Freyja’s trick is cast as a *senna* response (“Flá ertu, Freyia, er þú freistar mþn ”[Deceitful you are, Freyja, when you question me], 6:1–2), as is Freyja’s attempt to maintain her lie (“Dulin ertu, Hyndla, draums ætlig þér ... ”[You’re confused, Hyndla, you must be dreaming ...], 7:1– 2), but their *senna* leaves Hyndla unmoved. Although Freyja has attempted to assume an “Odinic role” (Ruggerini, 160) in relation to the *vǫlva*, her move to “freista ”is rebuffed by Hyndla. Freyja therefore compromises, suggesting they carry on their discussion out of the saddle, proceeding at once to the topic of princely genealogy (Hdl. 8). She then reveals Óttarr’s wager and his abiding faith in *ásynjur*, before posing the direct question to Hyndla (“hvat er Skiǫldunga? ... ”[which are of the Skiǫldungs]) that elicits the genealogical recitation. At its close, Freyja makes another demand of Hyndla, that she bring her boar a “minnisǫl ”(memory-ale) (45:1) so that he may remember the lineage Hyndla has just recited when he meets Angantýr.

Just as the *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar* reacts with anger to Óðinn’s

dissembling, so too has Hyndla nothing but scorn for Freyja's delayed admission that her boar is indeed Óttarr. Like the *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar*, Hyndla longs to return to the state she was in before being roused (Hdl. 46:2), and like her, she sends her interrogator away (“snúðu burt heðan!” [go away from here!], 46:1). “Heðan” seems, then, to refer unequivocally to Hyndla's abode on the road to the world of the dead, the place where once left alone, she can return to her cave and go back to sleep. Freyja would have preferred Hyndla's recitation to have been given in Valhǫll, on her own home ground, and is herself at risk lingering on enemy turf among giants and the dead. The manuscript reading of st. 48 therefore makes sense without emendation: Hyndla retaliates against Freyja's imposition by casting fire from herself to prevent Freyja returning to Ásgarðr. The textual cohesion of Hyndla's utterance (‘heðan’ in sts. 46 and 48) is reinforced by the refrain “hleypr þú eðlvina” (you gallop, noble lady) in this stanza as well as the stanzas preceding and following it (sts. 47 and 49).

The significance of fire is elaborated in the next stanza, when, like the *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar*, Hyndla turns her attention to *ragna rǫk*, and the imminent destruction of all but a few of the Æsir:

Hyr sé ec brenna, enn hauðr loga,
verða flestir fiðrlausn þola; Hdl. 49:1–4

(Fire I see burning and the earth aflame, most when suffering will try to ransom
their lives)

This gesture would have little dramatic effect if it were Freyja who had just threatened to engulf Hyndla in flames. At *ragna rǫk* it is the giants and their allies Surtr and the sons of Muspell who set fire to the world (Vsp. 51–5), an image of conflagration Hyndla rekindles to intimidate Freyja. The memory of her recitation, which Óttarr may still be able to use (depending on how “heimskr” [foolish] he in fact was), is symbolically poisoned by Hyndla in a further taunt to Freyja:

Ber þú Óttari biór at hendi,
eitri blandinn miðc, illo heili! Hdl. 49:5–8
(Put this beer into Óttarr's hand, mixed with a great deal of poison and ill
fortune!)

Being a *vǫlva* might entail prophetic insight and even rhetorical fervor but it does not entail physical efficacy, and Freyja turns at once to the second stage of her strategy, the petitioning of the gods to favour Óttarr. Through their power, Hyndla's curse can be negated, and Óttarr can establish his legal rights using the knowledge he has gained from Hyndla (st. 50). Although the enmity between *ásynja* and “brúðr iðtuns” (giant's bride) is brought out into the open, the dominance of gods over giants that prevails in the mythic present is reinstated. The ending of the poem suggests that Freyja and Óttarr escape unburnt, just as Óðinn returns victorious at the end of *Baldrs draumar*

and *Vafþrúðnismál*. In another article (Quinn 1995) I have explored the way in which the gender of speakers affects the rhetorical manoeuvres they make in speech-acts such as this, most notably, how much more aggressive the *vǫlva* is in dealing with an *ásynja* compared with an *áss*. Despite Freyja's winsome approach to Hyndla, calling her "sister" (Hdl. 1), her insinuation of friendship is thrown back at her when Hyndla uses the rhetorical strategy of the *senna* to broadcast details of Freyja's sexual profligacy. By referring to Freyja as "eðlvina"²⁸ in the thrice-repeated taunt, Hyndla's sarcasm undermines any notion of friendship between them, as well as raising doubts about Freyja's presumption of noble status.

The relative status of the two speakers and the relationship of their kin groups is very much at issue in *Hyndluljóð*, even within the recitation of genealogical knowledge (Steinsland, 476–7). Hyndla mentions two marriages of giantesses (Gerðr and Skaði) to Vanir gods (Freyr and Niðr, Hdl. 30), the group of divine beings to which Freyja herself belongs. Hyndla also draws attention to the fact that the god Heimdallr was the son of nine mothers, all of whom were giantesses (Hdl. 35), and to Loki's parenting role with the giantess Angrboða (Hdl. 40), although their offspring was the wolf Fenrir. Across the broad sweep of mythological history, then, giantesses have played a more important role in Æsir society than the Æsir might like to acknowledge, especially the Vanir among them, who represent an earlier wave of assimilation into Æsir culture.²⁹ But whereas giantesses can count themselves among the Æsir only by virtue of a divine husband or lover, Freyja secured her elevated position in divine society as the daughter and sister of the Vanir gods who were accepted into Æsir society on the condition that they abandon their custom of incest (Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* 1:13). The prohibition against marrying her brother seems to have made Freyja something of a free agent, and although she is mentioned in connection with Óðr (Vsp. 25, Hdl. 47, *Gylfaginning* 29/25), her marital status—and Óðr's identity—is rather shadowy. According to *Hyndluljóð* 47, Óðr was only one of many who enjoyed Freyja's sexual pleasure, and in *Lokasenna* 30, she is accused of having been the lover of every *áss* and *álfr* (elf) in the hall.

Loki also calls Freyja a "fordæða" (witch) (Ls. 32:2), connecting her to witchcraft and evil-doing. In *Ynglinga saga*, Freyja is said to have taught *seiðr* (magic) to the Æsir (Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* 1:13), an art that was practised among humans by a *vǫlva* named Heiðr, according to *Vǫluspá*, st. 22. Heiðr's name among the gods was Gullveig, and her capture and torture appears to have been a significant event in the first war of the world between the Æsir and Vanir. Because of these associations, Gullveig and Heiðr have been identified as hypostases of Freyja (Dronke 1988, 228), which makes the dramatic engagement between Freyja and Hyndla an extraordinarily nuanced articulation of mythological tensions. The practice of *seiðr* forms a nexus between the *vǫlva*, Freyja and Óðinn, who are also closely associated with the world of the dead: the *vǫlva* dwells among the dead and yet is perpetually

able to be reborn or roused to speak, and Óðinn and Freyja divide the dead between them each day, according to *Grþmismál* 14, presumably to maintain some power over them and the knowledge the dead were attributed as having. None of the *vǫlva* in the eddic poems are represented as performing *seiðr* themselves, but the underlying tension between the gods and the *vǫlur/giantesses* about who has ultimate mastery of secret powers and foreknowledge (Nordal, 45) is felt in each of the poems.

Hyndla's recitation reaches forward as far as *ragna rǫk*, at which point she seals Freyja's fate by declaring "Þá er þ ráði, at regn um Þríóti "(then it is decreed that the gods come to their end) (Hdl. 42:7–8). Before terminating her performance, Hyndla returns to the description of Heimdallr's birth (Hdl. 35), this time stressing his role as progenitor of human dynasties: (Hdl. 43:5–8). Although the topic of Hyndla's recitation is Óttarr's genealogy, her agonistic relationship with Freyja is never far from the surface. In closing, Hyndla makes it clear that her knowledge stretches further forward, to "enn mátcari "(the more powerful one) who will one day hold sway (Hdl. 44), but obliquely hints that Freyja does not have the power to make her name him, nor to articulate the future beyond Óðinn's death.

In Old Norse mythology, Freyja is also an important focus of the human desire for divine intercession; she is described in *Ynglinga saga* as "blótgyðja "(('goddess of sacrifice", Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* 1:13) and in *Gylfaginning* as "nakvæmust mǫnnum til á at heita "(('most favourable for invoking', *Gylfaginning*, 25/2–3). Accordingly, the dramatic situation of *Hyndluljóð* involves not just Freyja, but also Óttarr. In the narrative frame of the poem he is referred to as "Óttarr "(Hdl. 10:7, 49:5, 50:7), "Óttarr iungi "(9:3) or "Óttarr iungi, Innsteins burr "(Óttarr the young, son of Innsteinn) (6:7–8), but within her recitation Hyndla repeatedly refers to him as "Óttarr heimsci "(Ottarr the foolish), an epithet that marks him as ignorant, even if the reason for his ignorance is simply his youth (Fleck, 43). Hyndla's recitation is therefore didactic in tone, at times quite imperious: "hlýð þú sǫgo minni!" (listen to my account!) (Hdl. 25:8) The *vǫlva*'s recitation is for the sole benefit of a human in *Hyndluljóð*, and in *Vǫluspá* her audience is said to include people of all social classes,³⁰ underlining the *vǫlva*'s importance not only in divulging her knowledge to the gods, but also in informing people of the history of the world from its beginning to its end. As Hyndla advises Óttarr in no uncertain terms, there was a great deal to listen to and remember. Hyndla's attitude to Óttarr probably also underlies the feelings of the *vǫlva* in *Vǫluspá*, when at the beginning of her recitation, she requests & x201C;hlióð "(hearing) from us all.

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Notes

1. I am not including in this sub-class the dialogue between Gróa and her son in *Grógaldur* (preserved only in post-medieval paper manuscripts) because in its metre (*ljóðaháttur*) and its content (*galdrar*), Gróa's recitation is more akin to Sigrðrpfá's enumeration of runes and counsel in *Sigrðrpfumál*. The point of similarity between Gróa and the *vǫlva* is simply their deceased state.
2. All quotations of eddic poems from the edition of Gustav Neckel revised by Hans Kuhn (fifth edition, 1983), unless otherwise indicated. Translations adapted from Larrington 1996.
3. Quotations from *Gylfaginning* are taken from Faulkes' edition (1982) and follow his practice of giving page and line numbers.
4. For a survey of interpretations of "þviðia" in *Vǫluspá*, see Nordal, 9–10. Stefán Karlsson's re-examination of the *Codex Regius* under ultra-violet light suggests that "þviðior" is the correct reading of Vsp. 2:6 in both versions, ending the need for ingenious interpretations of "þviði" which the worn letters have long invited.
5. The fact that the number of *þviðjur* is nine might invite an association with Heimdalr's birth by nine giant mothers. The number nine might be a prompt to other myths, however, since the *vǫlva* also remembers nine worlds in the same line of stanza 2 in both the *Regius* and *Hauksbók* texts of *Vǫluspá*.

6. The versions do differ in the patterning of tenses and the order of stanzas, a subject I have addressed elsewhere (Quinn, 1990a).

7. The manuscript reads “fe,” indicating that the ‘Father of Hosts chose for her ... *wealth*, wise speech and a rod of divination’, as well as jewellery. The implications of this textual emendation (from the noun “fe” to the verb “fecc,” with the consequent reversed direction of part of the exchange between Óðinn and the *vǫlva*) are treated in Quinn (forthcoming).

8. While it is not certain what the word “lúðr” means in this stanza, a “bier” is the usual interpretation (see Holtsmark). The argument that “lúðr” means cradle here and that Bergelmir’s birth is being referred to (see Machan, 82–3) seems unlikely given the mention of the giant’s great wisdom. Snorri interprets the verse rather differently, taking the word to mean ‘ark’ (Faulkes 1982, 121). He does not quote Vm. 29 in which the lineage Aurgelmir, Þrúðgelmir, Bergelmir is given; rather his account has Bergelmir as the only survivor of a deluge caused by the letting of Ymir’s blood. Either way, Vafþrúðnir’s earliest memory, in terms of generational time, is the death of Ymir, if not that of his grandson.

9. The distinction between knowledge as narrative vision and abstractly categorised knowledge which is memorised and rehearsed does not always run along gender lines. The valkyrie Sigdrǫfja, for instance, has knowledge of all worlds and is able to teach it to Sigurðr. Like Vafþrúðnir, she describes her knowledge in terms of “stafr” and “runar” (“fullr er hann [biór] lióða, oc lþcnstafa, / góðragaldra oc gamanrúna” [it is full of spells, and favorable letters, / good charms and joyful runes], Sd 5:5–8).

10. “Vit heitir speki, rað, skilning, mini, ætlvn, hygiandi, tavlvisi, langsæi, bragðvisi, orðspeki, skavrvngskapr ...” (Wisdom is called sagacity, counsel, understanding, memory, deliberation, intellect, numeracy, far-sightedness, subtlety, eloquence, genius) (F. Jónsson, 192; tr. Faulkes, 1987, 155).

11. As McKinnell observes (112): “... Óðinn does represent wisdom as opposed to the mere knowledge of the *vǫlva*; but in fact, she also shows an understanding of the causal connections which link and explain what she knows, and so is not blindly knowledgeable in the way that Vafþrúðnir and Alvpss are.”

12. In *Alvpssmál*, the dwarf Alvpss (All-wise) apparently does know everything, and has to be outsmarted by daylight trickery rather than word games; see the essay by Acker in this volume.

13. It is not explicit in either manuscript of the poem who speaks this verse. To keep the alternating pattern of speakers it is usually attributed to Óðinn, to whose position as guest the gnome is directed, and who elsewhere shows himself to be a master of such advice (HÁv. 19, 27, 29). The gnomic aside could indeed be read as a hint to Óðinn’s identity, unheeded by Vafþrúðnir (Ruggerini, 168), who soon learns the price of too much unguarded talk (McKinnell, 99).

14. See de Vries, 1:125.

15. The formulation “hveriar ro þær meyar, er at muni gráta” (who are those girls who weep for love) (Bdr. 12:3–4) is also found in *Vafþrúðnismál* 48: “hveriar ro þær meyar, er lþða mar yfir ...” (who are those girls who journey over the sea ...). See Gering and Sijmons (344), Clunies Ross (1990, 225) and Ruggerini (184–5).

16. As Ruggerini has also noted (186): “The question which Óðinn has put to her is not formulated in the clear, direct manner of someone who wants an answer, but in the metaphorical, imaginative form used by someone who is more intent on testing the wit of the person being questioned.”

17. See Ruggerini’s similar conclusion (178): “The final question [Vm. 54] is well thought out, but must be regarded as foul play (except in the view of Óðinn, who regards any trick as permissible if it achieves his ends.)”

18. Lindorf argues that Angrbóða, the mother of Hel, Fenrir and the Miðgarð serpent, is “a good candidate for the identity of the seeress” (46). As he notes, “the poetic tradition, however, does not quite verify the relationship, nor is identification necessary for the rhetorical resolution of the encounter between Óðinn and the *vǫlva*. See also Dronke (1997),

19. The stanza in the H text is as follows:

Þá kná Vála vþgbǫnd snúa,
heldr vóro harðgor hǫpt, ór þǫmom.
þar sitr Sigyn þeygi um sþnom
ver vel glýiut vítoð þér enn, eða hva?

(Then oppressive bonds were twisted, rather severe fetters made of Váli's entrails. There sits Sigyn, not at all happy about her husband—do you understand yet, or what?)

For a discussion of this difficult stanza, see Nordal, 70–1).

20. The dangers involved in such a journey are described by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* (47/7–35) when he tells the story of Hermóðr's journey to Hel. On the theme of the other-world journey in Old Norse sources, see Lönnroth, 154–7.

21. Larrington (42, 64) views Loddfáfnir as a representation of members of the audience of *Hávamál*.

22. Jochens (272–3) has drawn attention to the different presentation of the *vǫlur* of *Baldrs draumar* and *Vǫluspá*, remarking on the latter's self-assurance and attitude of superiority. Damico's assertion that the *vǫlur* act "under compulsion, usually exhibiting pain" (721) overlooks the evidence of *Vǫluspá* and generalises across the corpus from *Baldrs draumar*. McKinnell, too, speaks of Óðinn's "raising up of prophetesses, forcing them to prophesy for him (*Vsp.* and *Bdr.*)" (102), based on the bewitching implied in *Vsp.* 28. However Óðinn initially brought about the recitation, *Vǫluspá* presents a *vǫlva* who is markedly different in the tone of her recitation and in the material way her information is valued compared with the *vǫlva* of *Baldrs draumar*. Dronke (1997, 51–2) provides an eloquent commentary on the encounter between Óðinn and the *vǫlva* in stanzas 28–9 of *Vǫluspá*.

23. On exchanges between the living and the dead in the medieval period, see Geary (77–87).

24. For example in *Epriks saga rauða*, ch. 4; see Kress.

25. See Vigfússon and Unger (11) and Neckel-Kuhn (289).

26. For a survey of the possible meanings of "hlið" in this line, see Pipping (39).

27. Modern editors indicate their interpretation of the sequence of speakers by quotation marks. By this means, Neckel and Kuhn attribute stanzas 45, 48 and 50 to Freyja and stanzas 46, 47 and 49 to Hyndla. In order to support this reading, they delete the refrain "hleypr þú, eðlvina, úti Á náttom" from stanza 48, but also from stanza 49, even though stanza 49 is attributed to Hyndla in their edition. A similar interpretation is given by Jón Helgason in his edition of the poem. In his 1927 edition of eddic poems, Finnur Jónsson cuts out stanzas 29 to 44 (the so-called *Vǫluspá hin skamma*, which is printed separately, pp. 213–6) and severely edits the last stanzas of the poem, reducing six stanzas to three. Stanza 45 is attributed to Freyja ("Berk minnisöl ...") and the poem ends with only a half-stanza contribution by Hyndla (49:5–8)—a brief threat (edited out of context) which is easily rebuffed by Freyja's full stanza statement (st. 50). Guðni Jónsson also edits *Vǫluspá hin skamma* separately (pp. 499–503), and cuts the refrain from the second and third to last stanzas, attributing the third to last stanza (Hdl. 48) to Freyja, not Hyndla.

28. The meaning of "eðlvina" is not certain, but the definition proposed by La Farge and Tucker (42) following Neckel, "noble (female) friend (?), concubine," supports a reading which has the potential for considerable sarcasm.

29. On the manner in which the *Æsir* first distinguish themselves from the giant race, and the stages in which they assimilate the *Vanir* and then certain giantesses into their kin-group, see Clunies Ross (1994, 56–60 and 93–102).

30. [See the article by Lönnroth translated earlier in this volume. *Eds.*]

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